

## EDWIN R. EMBREE

has been dealing with race relations during almost all of his adult life. For the past fifteen years he has been president of the Julius Rosenwald Fund, a chief interest of which is the betterment of the conditions of the Negro in America. Before that, he was secretary and then vice-president of the Rockefeller Foundation and set up for that organization a department for the study of "human biology." In carrying out this special job he traveled not only all over the United States but to China, Japan, the Pacific Islands, Central and South America, and Europe.

His famous study of the Negro, *Brown America*, was first published ten years ago, and brought out (as *Brown Americans*) in a completely new edition in 1943. Embree, thus, is one of the pioneer students of race relations, and his work has made him for almost three decades a leader in the fight for justice and tolerance.

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AGAINST THE ODDS



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**PROSPECTING FOR HEAVEN**

**ISLAND INDIA GOES TO SCHOOL**

**INDIANS OF THE AMERICAS**

**AMERICAN NEGROES: A HANDBOOK**

**BROWN AMERICANS**

13

AGAINST THE ODDS

BY

*Edwin R. Embree*

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## AGAINST THE ODDS

**S**UCCESS against the odds is the American ideal. Pioneering is our tradition. We adore those heroes who carve out their careers with their own hands and their own wits, who start at the bottom and climb to the top.

Brown Americans are the modern pioneers. To make a good life, Negroes not only must face all the trials of their white neighbors; they must overcome much greater obstacles—the degradation of recent slavery, the generations of illiteracy and dependence, the current prejudice and discrimination.

This book tells the struggles and achievements of thirteen Negroes who are tops today. These are success stories in the best American tradition of creating new frontiers, for these people have been breaking the barriers that hedge the marginal man. They are also stories of very human beings: of good, tough personalities, with the joys and sorrows common to all men, with the extra pain that comes from the prejudices of their neighbors, and the added zest that comes with climbing from special depths to the pinnacles of distinction.

To choose these top Negroes, I polled a special panel of two hundred persons, colored and white, who know the group best. I did not set standards, but allowed each voter to use his own yardstick for measuring greatness. The voters studied the careers of scores of Negroes before making their selections, and of course there was a good deal of variation in the choices. But the poll was so definite that the following thirteen persons stand out as at least representative of highest distinction among Brown Americans today.



**Marian Anderson:** the Philadelphia choir girl who has become one of America's most distinguished singers and beloved personalities.

**Mary McLeod Bethune:** born in a family of seventeen children on a plantation in South Carolina; founder of Bethune-Cookman College; organizer of the Negro Division of the National Youth Administration; leader of Negro women in America.

**George Washington Carver \*** : born in poverty and slavery, who, through his loving understanding of nature and his magic with sweet potatoes and peanuts, helped to free the South of its peonage to cotton and to bring new wealth to the region.

**W. E. B. Du Bois:** born in a New England village just after the Civil War; educated at Harvard and Berlin; brilliant writer of caustic, classic English; elder statesman of his race.

**Langston Hughes:** poet, whose ancestry includes a Jewish slave trader, a Cherokee Indian, and French and Irish strains, as well as African; born and reared in the Middle West, equally at home in Harlem and Hollywood, Paris and Moscow.

**Charles S. Johnson:** profound scholar and dignified gentleman; head of the Social Science Institute at Fisk University and a director of the Julius Rosenwald Fund; one of America's chief social scientists.

**Mordecai Johnson:** Baptist preacher, president of the leading Negro institution of higher learning, Howard University in Washington, D.C.

**Joe Louis:** the Mississippi urchin and Detroit gamin who became boxing champion of the world and is now fighting in the United States Army in the world war for democracy.

**A. Philip Randolph:** organizer of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters; fighter and mystic, who has merged

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\* Died January 5, 1943, after the poll was completed.

the Negro's cause with the general struggle of the common man.

Paul Robeson: son of a runaway slave, who has won world fame in sports and scholarship, in singing and acting, in promoting the cause of total democracy.

William Grant Still: pupil of W. C. Handy, "the father of the blues," and of Edgar Varese, the modernist; composer for piano, voice, and symphony.

Walter White: Secretary of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People; a leading crusader for civil rights for all the people.

Richard Wright: born in Mississippi; reared in the rural South and urban North; bitter and brilliant writer; author of *Native Son*.

This "prize list" is significant not so much for the names it stars—above dozens almost equally famous—as for showing the diversity of Negroes who are attaining distinction throughout the nation. It is the Americanism of these lives that interests me most. These are not people apart. They are Americans. Brown Americans, yes, and so suffering special hurts and handicaps. But they are flesh and blood and spirit of the great democratic adventure in the New World.

The boy of African parents who started his life in slavery in Missouri is in the same tradition as the English immigrant on whose plantation he was born and who struggled almost as hard as he to wrest a living from the Western soil and to make a fresh life in this New World. The brown boy on the streets of Detroit fought to win the world's boxing championship as bravely as an equally penniless Scotch boy on the streets of Pittsburgh fought to build the Carnegie steel empire. The black girl who trudged five miles back and forth to the little country school in South Carolina, and kept fighting upward until she became one of America's educational leaders, has much in common with all the women pioneers of this new nation.

Like other Americans, the thirteen members of this galaxy show the widest variety in every phase of their lives. There is no longer a stereotype for "The Negro." From the most diverse backgrounds, by the most diverse roads, these personalities have won their places as leading figures in the diversity of peoples that is America.

In color they vary all the way from the light cream of Walter White through every shade of tan and brown to the magnificent ebony of Mrs. Bethune. They have in their blood all the great races of man. A few may be pure African. Many trace part of their parentage to American Indians. Most of them have much white blood: English, Irish, Dutch, Jewish, French, German—all the strains that have gone into the making of the new American people.

In age they range from the late twenties to over three score years and ten. Joe Louis is the youngest—born in 1914. At the other extreme are the late George Carver, who was born a slave, and Doctor Du Bois and Mrs. Bethune, who came onto the scene just as freedom was won. Thus in these three individual lives is reflected the whole eighty-year trek of a great race from the utter dependence of slavery to almost full citizenship in a great democracy.

Their early settings range from the preachers' studies of Charles Johnson and Paul Robeson, the middle-class homes of Marian Anderson and Walter White, the rural poverty of Mary Bethune and the city slums of Joe Louis, to no home at all for George Carver. As an only child, William Still or Mordecai Johnson contrasts with Mary Bethune, who was one of seventeen. Like other successful Americans, most of this group are college graduates. Charles Johnson and W. E. B. Du Bois have wide learning—as well as deep wisdom—far beyond American custom. On the other hand, Marian Anderson did not go beyond high school, Richard Wright got most of his education by his own reading, Joe Louis had

scarcely any schooling at all. Most of the group receive the modest incomes of scholars, artists, and civic leaders, but Marian Anderson, Paul Robeson, and Joe Louis are in the big money judged even by American standards.

Special gifts stand out in this galaxy. Almost half of these pioneers are in one or another of the fine arts: music, drama, literature. No other racial group in America would show anything like this excess of talent and success in artistic expression. Two of the leading Negroes have made their careers in protest movements—labor and civil rights—an unusual field for American “success.” One has come to the top through physical prowess—a natural reflection of the strength and stamina required for this race to survive the labors and hardships that have been its lot. Surprising in a race only three generations from slavery and illiteracy, four of this group rank in the very forefront of American scholars and educational leaders. In spite of the Negro’s deep interest in religion, only one preacher is included, and he was chosen probably because of his presidency of Howard University rather than because of his standing in the church.

Not one of these top Negroes is in business, the occupation which accounts for most of the success stories of white America. Also no doctor or lawyer or engineer appears on the list. This of course does not mean that there are not many able Negroes in business and the professions. It means simply that no Negro has yet won highest fame in those realms. Distinction has come first, as one would expect, in those fields in which individual talent and initiative find ready expression: arts, scholarship, protest movements, and physical prowess. It is much harder for a group that is struggling upward to get the resources required for big business or the equipment and clientele necessary for success in the professions.

Of course these lives are not typical. These are by defini-

tion exceptional people. Each is one in a million: thirteen leaders chosen from among thirteen million Brown Americans. But many Negroes are almost equally famous. Another jury might have chosen a very different galaxy. In fact, my panel of judges scored some close votes among dozens of individuals rated as of almost equal eminence. And the Negro group is so versatile and is flowering so swiftly that ratings are likely to be upset week after week by new achievement and fresh acclaim.

A few years ago, for instance, Roland Hayes certainly would have been named first among the singers, and in another few years Dorothy Maynor may have greatest fame. The distinctively "Negro" composer, W. C. Handy, is crowded off this list perhaps because of William Still's more general scope. Had it not been for his untimely death, E. E. Just probably would have been rated above Doctor Carver; Just was a more exact and brilliant laboratory scientist. Countee Cullen, Sterling Brown, Alain Locke, and Arna Bontemps stand high on anybody's list of writers, and Ethel Waters on anybody's roll of singers and actors. In fact, the whole realm of music and entertainment gleams with colored stars. Duke Ellington, Cab Calloway, Bill (Bojangles) Robinson, Lena Horne, Katherine Dunham, and Dean Dixon are examples of current popular figures. Willard Townsend, the quiet, hard-working member of the national Executive Board of the C.I.O., seems to some people to be doing more for Negro labor than the more conspicuous Philip Randolph. In these war times, many put the colored general, B. O. Davis, high on the list. At least a dozen young scholars are crowding the educational roster.

Negroes in many fields are almost as well known as any on this roll: C. C. Spaulding, insurance magnate of Durham, North Carolina; A. Clayton Powell, Jr., pastor of the Abyssinian Baptist Church of New York, the largest Christian

congregation in the world, and editor of the popular *People's Voice*; Channing Tobias, veteran head of the colored division of the national Young Men's Christian Association; Paul Williams, Los Angeles architect; E. Simms Campbell, cartoonist; Carter Woodson, historian of the race; Charles Houston and William H. Hastie in law; Dr. Theodore K. Lawless, fashionable Chicago physician; Dr. Louis T. Wright of the American College of Surgeons; Lieutenant Colonel M. O. Bousfield, in charge of the huge base hospital of the army division at Fort Huachuca, Arizona; Richmond Barthé and Augusta Savage among the sculptors, and Aaron Douglas and Hale Woodruff among the painters. These names, which stood high in this poll, are but examples of nationally known Negroes who might easily be put at the top in any rating.

The list of famous Brown Americans could be extended by hundreds. But not yet by thousands. The great mass of Negroes are still below the American average in learning, in economic and social status, in almost every phase of life. It is not surprising that this race, only three generations out of slavery and still discriminated against at every turn, has not yet come to full development. The surprising thing is that in so short a time and against such heavy odds so many have risen to the very top in achievement and in fame.

In the thirteen biographies that follow I have not hesitated to point out weaknesses along with strength, to quote sharp criticism as well as praise. I am describing not gods but interesting and very human people.



# AMAZON OF GOD





GORDON PARKS, O.W.I.

MARY McLEOD BETHUNE

# AMAZON OF GOD

**L**ARGE, black, full-bosomed and strong-limbed, Mrs. Mary McLeod Bethune would be called motherly were it not for her jutting jaw and mighty stride. Square white teeth gleam from her wide smile, and she falls easily into the homely speech of the rural South, but she doesn't fall into anybody's fond picture of an old southern mammy. She has a deep and reverent faith in God, yet she doesn't sit around waiting for God—or anyone else—to do her work for her. The college in Florida that bears her name, the training of hundreds of thousands of colored boys and girls under her division of the National Youth Administration, her work in leading the Negro women of America, the crusades for decent public schools and for Negro rights—these are all talked over with God and with her friends. But having sought guidance, she goes out and works.

"Nothing comes without faith and prayer," she said the other day. Then, flashing her teeth in a wide smile, "And nothing in my life has ever come without sweat too."

Certainly there was sweat from the beginning. Her parents and her older brothers and sisters were slaves on the McLeod and the McIntosh plantations in South Carolina. Mary Jane McLeod was born just after the Civil War, the middle child in a family of seventeen, the first of the children to be born in freedom. Her early recollections are of back-breaking toil in the fields, as her parents, one grandparent, and her brothers and sisters first worked out the purchase of a five-acre farm from one of their former masters, and then tried to keep their bodies fed and clothed on the products of this

tiny farm plus whatever odd jobs could be found around the countryside.

"Mother worked in the fields at Father's side," Mrs. Bethune says, "cutting rice and cotton and chopping fodder. All the children worked too. When I was only nine I could pick 250 pounds of cotton a day."

But in the little two-room shack that housed twenty people there was always prayer and praise and a deep and simple faith.

"I was first stirred to serious thinking," Mrs. Bethune says, "by the custom of holding family prayers every morning and evening. In the corner, by our huge clay fireplace, sat my old grandmother, Sophia, a red bandanna around her head, nodding and smoking a long-stemmed pipe. All day she talked to God as if He were a person actually present: 'Dear God, I am so happy to be living in this loving family, where I can get hot biscuits and butter, and coffee with cream, sitting at my own fireside.' Mother, more restrained, would thank God for giving her freedom, shelter, and the privilege of having her children with her. . . . My great joy was in those moments of spontaneous prayer and song which relieved our days of ceaseless toil."

Yet the mind of this eager child was not entirely on heavenly things. On market days, when she went to town with her father, she saw the contrast between the lives of the masters and their servants: the glass windows in the white houses, the carriages, the silk dresses and soft shoes that the little white girls wore, and the books they read.

Once, tagging along with her mother when she went to work at the "big house" of one of her former owners, little Mary Jane wandered into the playhouse of the white children. They received her gaily enough and showed her all their toys. But, as she picked up a book, one of the white girls said scornfully, "Put that down. You can't read." Mrs.

Bethune says, "When that nice little white girl said that, it just did something to me. I thought, 'Maybe the difference between white folks and colored is just this matter of reading and writing.' I made up my mind I would know my letters before I ever visited the big house again."

A few days later, when the family were in the field picking cotton, a friend came by with the glad tidings that a colored woman, paid by some Presbyterians up North, was starting a school for colored children. All the rest of the day Mary Jane picked her cotton and dragged her great cotton sack to the rhythm of "I'm a goin' to read. I'm a goin' to get educated."

Next morning she was up at dawn and started on the five-mile trudge to school. Every school day for the next six years she walked this five miles back and forth, back and forth, day after day, summer and winter, rain or shine, seeking the new learning, the magic learning that would make her really free.

The mission school was held in a small church that stood near Maysville in Sumter County, South Carolina. "There were some homemade benches," Mrs. Bethune remembers, "a little table and desks, a little pulpit, a blackboard on the wall, an old iron stove in the corner that smoked all over the room as it burned the wood the children cut and brought in. The teacher, Miss Emma Wilson, was the first Negro I ever heard called 'Miss' and the fairest-skinned colored person I had ever seen. The first morning she was standing at the door and greeted us so pleasantly that we all felt easy, all these crude and crudely dressed boys and girls from the South Carolina ruráls. We opened school the first day—and every day—with singing, prayer, and a Bible lesson. Then she started to teach us letters and numbers. We were on our way to learning."

Little Mary Jane, glowing with her new knowledge, wanted to pass it right on to everybody around her. She tried

to din some of it into her family. But none of them took to it much. Her wiry little mother—coal black and sharp featured—was too busy running the huge household. Her great, hulking black father was too tired after his long days in the fields. Her brothers and sisters were too busy raising families of their own on the old pattern of “a baby oncet a year, ’scusin’ leap year.” One of her sisters achieved a total of thirteen children, another twelve, and another ten.

Mary Jane stood out from the rural black pattern of her family and her surroundings. If any of them resented it, they didn’t show it in any way that Mrs. Bethune remembers. She says, “My mother said when I was born I was different from the rest. For one thing, I was the most homely child. The ordinary things the children did, I wouldn’t. My sisters wanted to get married early. I had no inclinations that way. The other children drank the grape wine that mother used to make. I didn’t care for it. My ideas were different. My mother was proud of it. She felt: here comes one of the children who is going to do something. My father felt the same way. The children themselves were proud of me. They weren’t mean to me about it. They accepted my leadership because I was always striving to set up something that was going in the opposite direction from the mass of things. When I got so I could count, everybody—white folks and colored—brought their papers to me to figure out the weight of the cotton and the price and what was each one’s share. From the first I made my learning, what little it was, useful every way I could.”

With unabashed candor she adds: “Of course I became a very definite favorite in the family: people in the community all loved me.”

At fifteen she had learned all the local school could teach and was eager to go away to bigger things. But a tragedy oc-

curred: the family mule died. The heartbroken girl took the mule's place in the plowing and watched the little farm go into debt to a white man—from which farms seldom returned to Negroes. One day as she knelt in the cotton fields praying for a chance for more schooling, her prayer seemed to be directly answered. Miss Wilson, her fair-skinned teacher, strode into the field telling a miracle. A white woman, a teacher 'way off in the Rocky Mountains in a place called Denver, had heard of the work of the Maysville mission school and, with the extra money she was making as a dressmaker, she wanted to send some little girl from that school off for further education. Of course the school had chosen Mary, and wanted to send her to the very place where her teacher had studied, Scotia Seminary in Concord, North Carolina.

"I pulled the cotton sack off my shoulder," Mrs. Bethune says, "got down on my knees, rolled my eyes toward heaven, and thanked God."

Going away for school, or for anything, was an event in the rural South of those days. The whole countryside rocked with excitement. "Some neighbors knitted a pair of stockings, some gave me little linsey dresses and aprons," Mrs. Bethune recalls. "Finally on an October day I went down to Maysville to get on a train for the first time in my life. All the neighbors stopped work that afternoon, got out the wagons, mules, and ox carts, some riding, some walking to Maysville to put me on the train to go to school. My little heart was going pit-a-pat. My mother clasped me in her arms crying, 'God bless my child.' Tears and handshakes. As the train moved on I had so strange a feeling, tears and pride too, for I was going to get educated, sure enough. I was going to be an Instrument of the Lord, to help my people rise. . . . When the train got to Concord a teacher met me and

took me to the beautiful brick building of Scotia Seminary. I had never seen a brick building before. I was taken upstairs. I had never been upstairs before. A beautiful little room with two beds. Oh, it was so different, different. I got down on my knees and thanked God."

It was different and beautiful and grand. She had a good deal of trouble at first with the array of knives and forks on the white table-cloth in the big dining room. And she was a good deal shocked at some of the studies that seemed to have nothing to do with anything Mary Jane knew or wanted to know. Hour after hour she wrestled with Latin grammar and Caesar's Gallic Wars and a kind of crossword puzzle of numbers and letters called algebra.

There were exciting things, too. She worked out part of her expenses, and the hours in the kitchen and the laundry were a joy. She won prizes for her bread and cakes. Strong as a colt, she led all her fellows in scrubbing floors and in heaving wood and coal for the fires. She sang in the school chorus and led the debating team. Her classmates dubbed her "Dick" McLeod and soon began to bring their troubles and trials to this sturdy, wholesome girl. She liked her teachers, loved especially Hattie Bower and Rebecca Cantcy, "who along with Miss Wilson showed me what cultivated Negroes can be and can do." She met here for the first time white teachers as well as colored.

"I can never doubt the sincerity and wholeheartedness of some white people," she says, "when I remember my experience with these beloved, consecrated teachers who took so much time and patience with me when patience and tolerance were needed."

When she finished the course at Scotia Seminary she "felt a call to be a missionary to Africa." But there were no openings. Instead she was given a scholarship by the Presbyterian Board and bundled off to a place almost as foreign as Africa

—Chicago—where she worked and studied for two years at the Moody Bible Institute. After the Bible course she tried again to get to Africa, but in vain.

Coming back to her southern homeland after these rebuffs from the foreign field, she started to teach at Haines Institute in Augusta, Georgia. Here she was associated with a pioneer Negro educator, Lucy Laney, whom she regards as one of the great influences in her life. "She helped me see," Mrs. Bethune says, "that Africans in America need Christ and the school just as much as Negroes in Africa." For seven years she taught wherever the field seemed needy and fertile: in Sumter, South Carolina, in Savannah, Georgia, and in Palatka, Florida.

During the year at Savannah she met and married Alburtus Bethune, "a fellow school teacher with a fine tenor voice but not deeply interested in education." She dropped out of teaching for one year to bear and tend a son. But she says, "This married life was not intended to impede things I had in mind to do. The birth of my boy had no tendency whatever to dim my ardor and determination." One feels a certain pity for any romance or family ties that might get in the way of this Amazon's driving zeal. Her husband died in a few years. While she has done her duty by her son, her preoccupation has been not love or family but her work.

During these early years of teaching she kept looking for a chance to build a school of her own. She felt that the schools she saw were not feeding the basic wants of the newly freed race. "My people needed literacy," she says, "but they needed even more to learn the simples of farming, of making decent homes, of health and plain cleanliness."

As a matter of fact, she just had to have a place of her own. So dynamic—so bossy—a woman has to run her own show. She proudly traces her descent from African despots, "not a drop of any blood but Africa," and she is by nature



and by training a ruler. Her despotism is benign. Her tremendous energy all goes to "the Cause." But from earliest childhood she and her cause have been one.

As she was teaching in Palatka, she learned that hundreds of Negroes were flocking into eastern Florida to work on the new Flagler railroad and that many were living in squalor and crime—and ignorance. After traveling up and down the east coast of Florida, she decided that the growing resort of Daytona Beach was the strategic spot. She had exactly \$1.65 when she chose her site and decided to start her school. She borrowed a shabby four-room cottage near the resort, promising to pay some rent if she could, and on October 3, 1904, opened what was the beginning of Bethune-Cookman College. Her first class was five little girls and her own son.

This school grew—as all Mrs. Bethune's projects have—by faith and work. "We burned logs," she says, "and used the charred splinters as pencils, and mashed elderberries for ink. I begged strangers for a broom, a lamp, a bit of cretonne to put around the packing case which served as my desk. I haunted the city dump and the trash piles behind hotels, picking up cracked dishes, broken chairs, discarded linen, pieces of old lumber. Everything was scoured and mended. This was part of the training: to salvage, to reconstruct, to make bricks without straw. As parents began gradually to leave their children overnight, I had to provide beds. I took corn sacks for mattresses. Then I picked Spanish moss from trees, dried and cured it, and used it as a substitute for mattress hair."

She worked, she begged; she used everyone and everything she could put her hands on. Also she prayed. With faith, over and over she undertook the impossible—and it was fulfilled. Over the entrance of the first building that went up she carved: "Faith Hall."

The annals of her college are full of what she regards as

direct answers to prayer. Often in the early days she found herself with absolutely nothing to carry on—not even food for the children. One Saturday, having tried in vain to get credit from the grocer for \$4 worth of supplies for the week end, she came home almost beaten. Praying earnestly as she walked along, she found waiting on her porch four rough-looking Negroes who counted out into her hand a dollar each in grateful payment for some adult teaching they had had weeks before. Shouting thanks to God, she bundled the astonished men off to pay their money to the store and bring back her groceries.

Once as she was getting ready for a festive Christmas dinner for the pupils, all the dishes were suddenly called back by the lady who had lent them to the school. As the children began to cry, Mrs. Bethune said, "Be quiet, the Lord will provide"—and, she says, "that instant a colored butler from one of the resort homes staggered up with a great basket, saying, 'Mrs. Lawrence Thompson sent this basket of dishes; her son just gave her a beautiful new set as a Christmas present.'"

Another time when the cupboard was bare Mrs. Bethune, aroused in the night, was frightened to see outside her window two men in prison garb. They hastened to explain that the prison was so thankful for the singing services the school had given them on Sundays that keepers and inmates together had collected vegetables, fruits, groceries, and a little cash and sent it over by these two trustees.

When classes began to overrun the four rooms of the borrowed cabin, Mrs. Bethune decided that it was time to get property of her own. Near by was a large lot with beautiful live oaks, but it was mostly swamp ground used as a city dump and popularly known as "Hell Hole." She caught the owner at a lucky time, offered to take the dump off his hands and some day pay him \$200 in instalments. In a daze he

finally agreed to accept \$5 down and \$5 every month that she could find it. "He never knew it," Mrs. Bethune says, "but at the time I didn't even have the first \$5. But I got it all right—by selling ice cream and sweet potato pies to workmen who were putting up some new buildings at the beach." From this hell hole of a city dump has grown the present stately campus of Bethune-Cookman College.

To build her college Mrs. Bethune shamelessly exploited the tourists at Daytona Beach. She took her pupils around to sing at the hotels. She made speeches to groups and begged from individuals. She openly thanked the guests for gifts, however small, and secretly prayed God that the gifts would grow larger—and they did. James N. Gamble, the Ivory Soap king, J. S. Peabody of Columbia City, Indiana, Thomas H. White, the sewing machine magnate, were among those she prayed up from pittances—in one case 25 cents—to later gifts of \$1000, \$10,000, \$67,000.

Slowly through these forty years the institution has grown from a struggling little primary school to one of the important colleges of the Deep South, from an opening class of six children to two hundred and fifty college students throughout the year and six hundred for the special courses of the summer sessions, from an initial capital of \$1.65 to a plant valued above a million dollars. At first it was a school for girls, but in 1922 Cookman College, a Methodist school for boys in Jacksonville, was merged with it, and since that time regular support has come from the Methodist Church Board of Education.

Knowing that book learning was not enough for people in need of everything, Mrs. Bethune built no academic college. Booker Washington, rather than Aristotle, was her ideal. With a solid grounding in the three R's, she led her students on to preparation for living and for making a liv-

ing. Farming, cooking and sewing, care for food and health, hand skills, were at the center of her course. "English and arithmetic? Yes, for they are necessary tools for modern living. But algebra and Latin and other high-falutin' academic courses? No, not for children who are going to live in everyday America."

In 1934 President Roosevelt called Mrs. Bethune to direct the colored division of the National Youth Administration. Mrs. Roosevelt delights to tell of the first interview between the President and the prospective head of the Negro N.Y.A. Mrs. Bethune was naturally a good deal awed as she was received in the White House by stiff and formal ushers and shown into the President's office. She listened very quietly as President Roosevelt outlined the plans for emergency education. But as he mentioned the proposed division of funds between white and colored children, Mrs. Bethune forgot her awe, rose, strode over so that she towered above the President's desk, shook her square black finger in his face, and cried: "Mr. President, you've got to do better than that for me." The President roared, admiring her directness, and understanding that she was demanding not anything for herself but more for the children of her race.

For eight years she was the vigorous and colorful leader of this "school" that has given hundreds of thousands of colored youth the only education they could hope to get. In one year 600,000 Negroes were in N.Y.A. classes. In these emergency schools, most of which for colored children were in the rural regions, Mrs. Bethune crowded as much as she could of her old home remedy of the three R's, plus the practical needs of country living: farming, homemaking, hand skills.

In 1935 she organized the National Council of Negro Women and is now devoting her abundant energy to the

direction of its work. Uniting almost all the Negro women's clubs of the country, which have a membership of over 800,000, this organization is trying to improve the position of Negroes and to promote better race relations. Mrs. Bethune is thus the official leader of the women's organizations of her race; unofficially she has long been recognized as the leader of all colored women in America.

Her labors for her school, for the nation's youth, and for Negro women are but the official part of her work and influence. Wherever education is discussed Mrs. Bethune's voice is heard. Wherever two or three are gathered together in behalf of better race relations, there she is likely to be also. Ida Tarbell selected her as one of the fifty women who have contributed most to the enrichment of American life. She shares with Hugo Black, Will Alexander, and Frank Graham the awards of the Conference on Southern Welfare for outstanding service to the South.

She is burdened by no false modesty or self-consciousness. Knowing her own worth and the righteousness of her cause, she moves with determination and assurance that brook no interference. Her friends relate with pride an episode at the Southern Conference on Human Welfare held in Birmingham in 1940, when Mrs. Bethune, as head of an important section, presented a set of resolutions for better schools. The white lady chairman, wanting to record her approval but following naturally the taboos against titles for Negroes, called for "the adoption by the conference of Mary's resolutions." The motion was put and carried. Whereupon Mrs. Bethune arose and said as humbly as she could, which is never very humble: "I do not care what anyone calls me as an individual. But as a delegate from Florida I must insist on respect to that sovereign state, and since there are probably dozens of Marys at this conference I ask that it be entered on the record that the resolutions were presented by Mrs.

Mary Bethune." The house stormed its applause, and the question of titles versus first names for Negro delegates was not an issue again in that convention.

When Mrs. Bethune received the call from the White House to head the colored division of the National Youth Administration, she happened to be in Atlanta. Having just a few minutes to catch a train, she rushed into the station. Without noticing that she was in the white waiting room rather than in the shabby lobby "for colored" around the corner of the building, she strode up to the ticket window, slapped down two \$20 bills, and demanded, "Give me a ticket and a lower berth to Washington, and do it quick." The white ticket chopper, cowed by her assured manner, passed out the tickets and change as fast as he could. As the huge black body swept on through the white lobby to the train, he turned shamefaced to his fellows in the ticket booth and said: "Gee. Do you know? I believe she was colored!"

After a bi-racial conference at New York's Astor Hotel one afternoon, the group was sitting around in general conversation. One of the white delegates got to talking about the tradition that Negro men always preferred lighter women, and remarked that it was said that light colored girls were often annoyed by the bold advances of black men. Mrs. Bethune said casually, her coal-black face straight as a preacher's, "I don't know. It has never happened to me."

It is as a Representative of the People that Mrs. Bethune thinks and acts. She knows she is a Public Institution, that her own life shows the growth of her people.

Her life covers the complete span of Negro freedom. Against it can be viewed the swift progress of her race.

When Mrs. Bethune was born, less than 5 per cent of Negroes could read simple sentences or write their own names. During her lifetime Negro literacy has climbed to over 90 per cent—equal to the literacy of the whole popu-

lations of all but a few of the most enlightened nations of the world. Just before her birth all southern states and some northern states had laws forbidding any teaching of slaves or "free persons of color." Mrs. Bethune has watched a whole system of schools and colleges grow up for her race. From a few colored children taught in little mission schools in her childhood, she has seen the Negro school enrollment in the South swell to two and a half million pupils, 255,000 of them in high schools and an additional 46,000 in the southern colleges and universities. In addition, hundreds of thousands of Negroes are studying in the unsegregated schools and colleges of the North and West.

The results of education are seen not only in the mass but in an ever thicker and richer cream of talent at the top. During the past six years 24,000 Negroes have been graduated from colleges and universities, more than the number that had been graduated during the entire previous history of the race. Some two hundred and fifty have received the Ph.D. degree, the highest that can be conferred by an American university. The distinguished men and women recorded in this book are but examples of hundreds of Negroes who are now taking their places at the very top of almost every phase of American life.

When Mrs. Bethune was a young girl, health conditions among her people were atrocious. The annual death rate of Negroes in 1890 was estimated at 33 per thousand, comparable to the shocking rates in India and China. In her lifetime the colored death rate, while still 30 per cent above the average for the nation as a whole, has been cut more than half—to 13.9 per thousand today.

Just before Mrs. Bethune's birth, Negroes, far from owning wealth, were themselves regarded as property. Slowly and against all odds, the race has climbed to substantial holdings, if not yet to riches. Some 175,000 colored families now

own their own farms—a total of eleven million acres, equal to the joint acreage of the three historic states of Massachusetts, Rhode Island, and Connecticut. Total wealth and property owned by Negroes today is estimated at two and a half billion dollars, and the annual income of the members of the race is well above two billion dollars. Over a million Negroes are workers in the mechanical and manufacturing industries of the nation, 150,000 of them as skilled workmen or foremen, and 225,000 as semi-skilled workers. Forty-one Negro insurance companies of national standing carry half a billion dollars of insurance. Negro banks, building and loan associations, and stores serve a steadily growing public. In government bureaus in Washington and in federal service throughout the country, chiefly as postal clerks, Negro white-collar workers have recently surged up to 150,000. In the professions are 66,000 Negro teachers, 17,000 preachers, 3500 physicians, 1600 dentists, 6000 nurses, and 1000 lawyers. Seven thousand regularly make their living as musicians and 1500 as actors and showmen. In music, literature and the arts, Negroes are leading the nation.

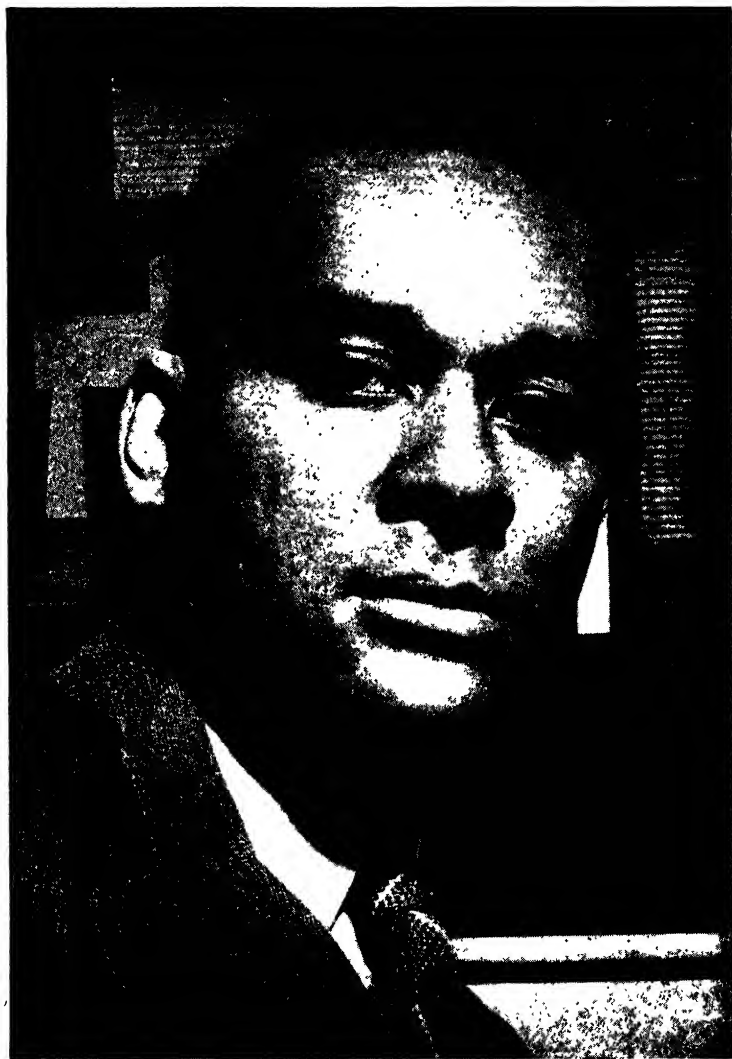
Mrs. Bethune knows that there are still many tragic scenes in the drama. Against the swift progress in education she sees half a million colored children who never get inside a school from one year to the next. She knows that nine southern states on the average still spend only \$19 a year for the education of each Negro child, compared to an expenditure of \$59 for each white child, and an average expenditure for the nation as a whole of \$88 per pupil. She knows that the Negro standard of living is far below the American average; that city relief rolls carry more than twice their quota of Negro unemployed; that southern farms still swarm with two and a half million colored sharecroppers—parents and children—scarcely above peonage; that Negroes are still segregated and grossly discriminated against, informally in



the North and by law and rigid custom in all the southern states. But with all the ills and odds that are the Negro's lot, Mrs. Bethune feels that the swift progress of her race is one of the miracles of human history.

She has been a part of this miracle, and in her own life this Amazon of God is a shining example of growth from utter poverty and dependence at emancipation to free full living and leadership today.

# NATIVE SON



GORDON PARKS, O.W.I.

RICHARD WRIGHT

# NATIVE SON

**R**ICHARD WRIGHT wanted to write not a book but a bomb. He wanted to tell what happened to Negroes under the hates and hurts of American life and to tell it with such hard, cold realism that people could not get away from it. He waited and brooded and studied year after year until the story grew clear and strong in his mind. The core of it was in his soul, planted by his birth into black America, fed by the fears and handicaps he had known in the southern rurals and in the great roaring cities of Memphis and Chicago.

He wanted no sentimental tale to draw easy tears. After he had written some stories called *Uncle Tom's Children*, he said, "I realized that I had made an awfully naïve mistake. I found I had written a book which even bankers' daughters could read and weep over and feel good about. I swore to myself that if I ever wrote another book, no one would weep over it; that it would be so hard and deep that they would have to face it without the consolation of tears. It was this that made me get to work in dead earnest." After nearly three decades of tense living and three years of travail in writing, Richard Wright published *Native Son*.

All of this man's life has been building toward this and the other books that he will write. His biography is not a series of outward happenings—born here, schooled there, holding this and that job. All of his living and thinking have gone into understanding how man-made forces playing upon a boy create him in their image—hate responding in rebellion and violence from below to hate pressing down in selfish

cruelty from above. His life is the growing of an intense feeling and of a power of expression by which he can bring light—and maybe healing—to dark sores in our society.

Richard Wright began his life on September 4, 1908, on a sharecropper farm near Natchez, Mississippi, the delta region where the richest agriculture of white America stands on the beaten backs of the poorest blacks. His parents, "part white, part black, part Indian," had no fixed home, but moved about from farm to farm, from town to town, as colored tenants do in the Deep South. His mother, light brown, good looking, possessed of a few years of book learning, got jobs a few months a year as a school teacher, at \$25 a month. His darker father, who had never been inside a school, tilled the soil "on shares" on a big plantation—shares that at the end of the year always seemed to be eaten up by the supplies advanced by the plantation store.

There was not much in that kind of life to hold a family together. The father drifted off. The mother, who was growing sickly, took little Dick and his still littler brother to live with her parents in Natchez. Later the family lived sometimes with their mother's sister, sometimes by themselves, in Elaine and Helena and West Helena—Arkansas towns along the west banks of the Mississippi River. Then the mother had a paralytic stroke, and the family gave up the struggle to keep a home. She went back to her parents; Dick was sent to live with an uncle in Greenwood, Mississippi; his brother was shipped way up North to live with an aunt in Detroit. After a few miserable months with the uncle, Dick joined his mother and grandparents, who by that time had moved to Jackson, Mississippi.

The grandmother was one of the stable influences in Dick's shifting childhood. His years from ten to sixteen were under her stern hand. She was a Seventh Day Ad-

ventist, and so added peculiar zeal to the strict discipline of any godly home. Dick says he didn't resent the religious routine—church and Sabbath school, morning and evening prayers every day, long blessings before each meal. What he did resent was the differentness of this sect. Their Sabbath began at sundown Friday, just when most of his friends were freest for play and rollicking. He had to go to church on Saturday, while all his playmates and their families went on Sunday. He was sent to an Adventist church school, while his friends were in the public schools. Then there were special codes: no pork, for instance, when hog meat was the top of the diet for most of the colored families; special beliefs, such as the second coming of Christ in this generation, that seemed silly to the regular Christians. It was bad enough to be black and so cut off from the normal life of the region; but to be an Adventist, and so cut off from the common life of the Negroes, too!

When he was around twelve or thirteen, he rebelled at the Adventist school. He went to the Jim Hill Public School in Jackson, and then to the Smith-Robinson School, which had the first year of high school tacked onto the grammar grades. He remembers the Smith-Robinson School with some gratitude. The teachers tried their best to pump learning into the pupils. "They realized," Wright says, "that this was all the schooling the colored kids of Jackson were likely to get. So they gave all they had." He remembers having algebra for two years, United States history, civics, even a little botany and physiology. He learned to rattle off the names of all the bones in the body. "But I didn't learn anything worth knowing," he says. "I didn't even learn how to read with any skill, certainly not with any pleasure or understanding." Finally he was graduated from all that this school had to offer. He says, "It wasn't so much that I graduated as

that in the spring of 1925 the teachers capitulated." And that was the end of his schooling.

He stayed on in Jackson for the rest of that year, getting jobs and losing them because he kept "forgetting his place." Then he ran away to Memphis where he held jobs longer because he had learned better "how to live Jim Crow." In a year or two he went to Chicago. And there and in New York he has lived ever since.

These scant facts tell little of the growth and education of the man who all this time was creating *Native Son*. Fortunately Richard Wright remembers much of his real education in what it means to live in a world of hate, and has written parts of it down.

My first lesson in how to live as a Negro came when I was quite small. We were living in Arkansas. Our house stood behind the railroad tracks. Its skimpy yard was paved with black cinders. Nothing green ever grew in that yard. The only touch of green we could see was far away, beyond the tracks, over where the white folks lived. . . .

I never fully realized the appalling disadvantages of a cinder environment till one day the gang to which I belonged found itself engaged in a war with the white boys who lived beyond the tracks [in which he was smashed over the ear with a broken milk bottle and barely rescued by a passing doctor who took three stitches in his gashed and bleeding head].

I sat brooding on my front steps, nursing my wound and waiting for my mother to come from work. . . . When night fell, my mother came from the white folks' kitchen. I raced down the street to meet her. I could just feel in my bones that she would understand. I knew she would tell me exactly what to do next time. I grabbed her hand and babbled out the whole story. She examined my wound, then slapped me. "How come yuh didn't hide?" she asked me. "How come yuh awways fightin'?"

I was outraged and bawled. . . . She grabbed a barrel stave, dragged me home, stripped me naked, and beat me till I had a fever of one hundred and two. She would smack my rump with the stave, and, while the skin was still smarting, impart to me gems of Jim Crow wisdom. I was never to throw cinders any more. I was never to fight any more wars. I was never, never, under any conditions, to fight *white* folks again. . . .

All that night I was delirious and could not sleep. Each time I closed my eyes I saw monstrous white faces suspended from the ceiling, leering at me.\*

From that time on he "learned" to keep away from white folks—to fear them, to bow down to them, but most of all to avoid them. When he went from the little Arkansas towns to live with his grandmother in Jackson, this was easy. He lived in the heart of Jackson's black belt "with black churches and black preachers, black schools and black teachers, black groceries and black clerks." He began to forget about white folks, and his fears faded into just a hazy dread. But as he grew up, he had to get work to help keep the crowded and crippled family going. So he ventured into the white man's town and got a job in an optical shop.

"The morning I applied," he says, "I stood straight and neat before the boss, answering all his questions with sharp yessirs and nosirs. I was very careful to pronounce my *sirs* distinctly, in order that he might know that I was polite, that I knew where I was, and that I knew he was a white man."

By diligence and servility he kept the job for a month or so, though he came near trouble several times by looking

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\* The above quotation and those on pages 30 and 32 are from a series of essays by Richard Wright called "The Ethics of Living Jim Crow," published by Harper and Brothers, by whose permission they are reprinted here.



above his place and wanting to learn something about how to make glasses. This is the way he remembers the end of that job—his second lesson in learning to live Jim Crow.

The climax came at noon one summer day. Pease called me to his work-bench. To get to him I had to go between two narrow benches and stand with my back against a wall.

"Yes, sir," I said.

"Richard, I want to ask you something," Pease began pleasantly, not looking up from his work.

"Yes, sir," I said again.

Morrie came over, blocking the narrow passage between the benches. He folded his arms, staring at me solemnly.

I looked from one to the other, sensing that something was coming.

"Yes, sir," I said for the third time.

Pease looked up and spoke very slowly.

"Richard, *Mr. Morrie* here tells me you called me *Pease*."

I stiffened. A void seemed to open up in me. I knew this was the show-down.

He meant that I had failed to call him *Mr. Pease*. I looked at Morrie. He was gripping a steel bar in his hands. I opened my mouth to speak, to protest, to assure Pease that I had never called him simply *Pease*, and that I had never had any intentions of doing so, when Morrie grabbed me by the collar, ramming my head against the wall.

"Now be careful, nigger!" snarled Morrie, baring his teeth. "I heard yuh call 'im *Pease*! 'N' if yuh say yuh didn't, yuh're callin' me a lie, see?" He waved the steel bar threateningly.

If I had said: "No, sir, *Mr. Pease*, I never called you *Pease*," I would have been automatically calling Morrie a liar. And if I had said: "Yes, sir, *Mr. Pease*, I called you *Pease*," I would have been pleading guilty to having uttered the worst insult that a Negro can utter to a southern white man. I stood hesitating, trying to frame a neutral reply.

"Richard, I asked you a question!" said Pease. Anger was creeping into his voice.

"I don't remember calling you *Pease*, Mr. Pease," I said cautiously. "And if I did, I sure didn't mean . . ."

"You black blank! You called me *Pease*, then!" he spat, slapping me till I bent sideways over a bench. Morrie was on top of me, demanding:

"Didn't yuh call 'im *Pease*? If you say yuh didn't, I'll rip yo' blank, blank, blank, yuh black granny dodger! Yuh can't call a white man a lie 'n' git erway with it, you black blankity blank!"

I wilted. I begged them not to bother me. I knew what they wanted. They wanted me to leave.

"I'll leave," I promised. "I'll leave right *now*."

They gave me a minute to get out of the factory. I was warned not to show up again, or tell the boss.

I went.

When I told the folks at home what had happened, they called me a fool. They told me that I must never again attempt to exceed my boundaries. When you are working for white folks, they said, you got to "stay in your place" if you want to keep working.

But he kept on working, getting any jobs he could, learning to accept any treatment he got. Even if he just kept on living—work or no work—the Jim Crow lessons poured in. He had to learn to grin when he saw a policeman slap a black girl, for that policeman was known to have killed two Negroes "in self-defense." He got his mouth smashed when he was too frightened to accept a drink from some white rowdies. Yet he knew he would have been beaten senseless if he had had the effrontery to take it.

One day when he was polishing the brass in front of a clothing shop, the boss and his twenty-year-old son got out of their car dragging and kicking a Negro woman into the store, while a policeman stood by twirling his right stick. As

Wright went on feverishly polishing the brass, he heard shrill screams coming from the rear of the store. After what seemed to him hours, the woman stumbled out, bleeding and crying. The policeman at once grabbed her, accused her of being drunk, and threw her into the police wagon.

When I went to the rear of the store [Wright says], the boss and his son were washing their hands at the sink. They were chuckling. The floor was bloody, and strewn with wisps of hair and clothing. No doubt I must have appeared pretty shocked, for the boss slapped me reassuringly on the back.

"Boy, that's what we do to niggers when they don't want to pay their bills," he said laughing.

His son looked at me and grinned.

"Here, hava cigarette," he said.

Not knowing what to do, I took it. He lit his and held the match for me. This was a gesture of kindness, indicating that even if they had beaten the poor old woman, they would not beat me if I knew enough to keep my mouth shut.

"Yes, sir," I said, and asked no questions.

After they had gone, I sat on the end of a packing box and stared at the bloody floor till the cigarette went out.

He learned other queer twists of human nature, too. He met black toughs as well as white. He saw violence sprouting in many ugly shapes wherever selfishness and cruelty pressed down and there were no healthy outlets for the boiling emotions. In a recent essay, "How 'Bigger' Was Born," he tells of some of these experiences, all of which went into the picture he was building of the hero of *Native Son*.

When I was a bareheaded, barefoot kid in Jackson, Mississippi, there was a boy who terrorized me and all of the boys I played with. If we were playing games, he would

saunter up and snatch from us our balls, bats, spinning tops, and marbles. We would stand around pouting, sniffing, trying to keep back our tears, begging for our playthings. But Bigger would refuse. We never demanded that he give them back; we were afraid, and Bigger was bad. We had seen him clout boys when he was angry and we did not want to run that risk. We never recovered our toys unless we flattered him and made him feel he was superior to us. Then, perhaps, if he felt like it, he condescended, threw them at us and then gave each of us a swift kick in the bargain, just to make us feel his utter contempt. . . .

He *took* his way, right or wrong, and those who contradicted him had him to fight. And never was he happier than when he had someone cornered and at his mercy; it seemed that the deepest meaning of his squalid life was in him at such times.\*

If Richard Wright had known only one black bully—one Bigger Thomas—he could not have written *Native Son*. But he knew many. One whom he feared, yet secretly admired, directed his spleen not at other Negroes but at the whites who ruled the South. He bought clothes and food on credit and would not pay for them. He lived in the dingy shacks of the white landlords and refused to pay rent. He called Richard and his cronies fools for not *taking* what they wanted. “You’re near dead now anyway. What yer scared of?” The boys would listen silently, fascinated but afraid.

And there were sure-enough toughs, “bad niggers.” Of them the white men would say, “We’ll kill that goddam nigger one of these days.” And they usually did. Wright tells of two of these toughs who became a part of what he poured into *Native Son*.

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\* This quotation and that on page 34 reprinted by permission of Harper and Brothers.

There was the man I will call Bigger No. 4, whose only law was death. The Jim Crow laws of the South were not for him. But as he laughed and cursed and broke them, he knew that some day he'd have to pay for his freedom. His rebellious spirit made him violate all the taboos and consequently he always oscillated between moods of intense elation and depression. He was never happier than when he had outwitted some foolish custom, and he was never more melancholy than when brooding over the impossibility of his ever being free. He had no job, for he regarded digging ditches for fifty cents a day as slavery. "I can't live on that," he would say. Ofttimes I'd find him reading a book; he would stop and in a joking, wistful, and cynical manner ape the antics of the white folks. Generally, he'd end his mimicry in a depressed state and say: "The white folks won't let us do nothing." Bigger No. 4 was sent to the asylum for the insane.

Then there was Bigger No. 5, who always rode the Jim Crow streetcars without paying and sat wherever he pleased. I remember one morning his getting into a streetcar (ignoring the sign—FOR COLORED) and sitting in the white section. The conductor went to him and said: "Come on, nigger. Move over where you belong. Can't you read?" Bigger answered: "Naw, I can't read." The conductor flared up: "Get out of that seat!" Bigger took out his knife, opened it, held it nonchalantly in his hand, and replied: "Make me." The conductor turned red, blinked, clenched his fists, and walked away, stammering: "The goddamn scum of the earth!" A small angry conference of white men took place in the front of the car and the Negroes sitting in the Jim Crow section overheard: "That's that Bigger Thomas nigger and you'd better leave 'im alone." The Negroes experienced an intense flash of pride and the streetcar moved on its journey without incident. I don't know what happened to Bigger No. 5. But I can guess.

By the time Richard Wright went to Memphis, in the fall of 1925, he did not have much formal education but he

knew a lot about human nature and its fantastic twists. In the great river town he was freer than he had been in Mississippi or Arkansas. White people were so busy with their own affairs that they did not hound Negroes all the time. And the colored sections sprawled over such wide areas that Richard wasn't penned in by his own crowd. He lived in a rooming house on Beale Street—the raucous main stem of Negro life. But he chose a very respectable house, for, while he hadn't absorbed much of the Adventist creed, he has held all his life, without thinking much about it, to the straight and narrow paths on which his strict grandmother started his feet. He had learned his Jim Crow lessons so well that he held a pretty good job, again in an optical shop, all of the two years he was in Memphis.

Growing toward manhood, he began to want to write more than anything in the world. Even as a twelve-year-old lad in Jackson, he had written a story, "The Voodoo of Hell's Half Acre," for one of the Negro papers. His teacher scolded him for using "hell." His grandmother couldn't read, but she heard about it and asked him what he had written. When Dick said, "Oh, it was just a story," the old woman was shocked. "A story? A lie? Do you mean you wrote what wasn't true?" Dick had a time trying to explain. The best he could say was, "A story isn't true, but it might be true." His grandmother's question stuck with him. And he swore that all the stories he ever wrote would be true—cold, hard, and *true*.

To write the truth he knew he must think and understand. So, in his Beale Street room and wandering the Memphis streets, he struggled with "why" and "what does it mean." To write well he knew he must read and study. So he began to hunger for books. Since Negroes were not allowed to take books from the "public library" of Memphis, he thought up some clever tricks. He got a white man to sign

a card asking that books listed from time to time on separate sheets be sent him "by this boy." Dick wrote down long lists of books and carted them off to devour in his room.

In the winter of 1927-28 he moved on up to Chicago—the goal of all Negroes along the Mississippi Valley. By this time he was a grown man of nineteen. He was tall and strong, but his brown face had a lean and hungry look. He wanted a job: he wanted the freedom he had heard about in the North. But he kept wanting something more; he didn't know just what. He was growing more and more intense in the hunt for the "why," the "how does it happen and what does it mean."

A job came first, for you had to live if you were going to understand and to write. He got a place as porter and errand boy in a delicatessen. Then he worked as waiter and dish-washer in a tea room that Mrs. Crooks—mother of the New York tenor—ran in the Patricia Hotel on Fullerton Street. He held this job for almost a year, jouncing the ten miles back and forth every day in the streetcars, reading the while, from the swank North Side of the tea room to the Negro South Side, where he lived with his aunt.

During these early years in Chicago, his education bounded forward. He was thrilled at the roaring city, at the shabby, gaudy South Side black belt with its seething crowds. He saw Negroes having freer times than he had ever dreamed of. Yet he saw them balked and slapped back, too, over and over, in hundreds of ways in the strange patterns of prejudice that he knew so well.

While working in the delicatessen, he decided to take the Civil Service examination for a post-office clerkship—the best and steadiest job a young Negro could hope for. He tells of the crisis that arose as he tried, in the southern Negro pattern, to keep his plans from his employer.

Could I tell Mr. Hoffman, my boss, that I wanted time off without risking a racial clash between us? In the South it would have been bad policy for me to have told the white boss man that I wanted to take an examination for a better job; it would have implied, nine times out of ten, that I did not like to work for him and, inasmuch as most jobs involved a personal, paternalistic relationship, this was tantamount to an insult. Not knowing what sort of man Hoffman was, I decided to stay away from the job and invent a story to tell him when I returned. Since the examination took place on a Monday, and I was tired, I stayed away Saturday, Sunday and Monday. When I returned, of course, Mr. Hoffman was astonished.

"I thought you would never come back," he said.

"I'm awfully sorry, Mr. Hoffman," I said. "But my mother died in Memphis and I had to go down to bury her."

He looked at me.

"Rich, you lie," he said.

"I'm not lying," I lied.

"You wanted to do something so you stayed away," he said, shrugging.

"No, sir, I'm telling you the truth."

"No, you lie. You disappoint me," he said.

"Well, all I can do is tell you the truth," I lied indignantly.

"Why didn't you telephone?"

"I didn't think of it," I lied again.

"Rich, if your mother died, you would tell me," he said.

"I didn't have time. Had to catch a train," I lied yet again.

"Where did you get money?"

"My aunt gave it to me," I said, disgusted that I had to lie and lie again.

"I don't want a boy that tells lies," he said.

"I don't lie," I lied passionately to protect my lie.

Mr. Hoffman's wife joined in and both of them hammered at me.

"You are from the South. You feel you can't tell us the



truth," Mrs. Hoffman said. "We don't bother you, do we? We treat you nice?"

"Yes, ma'am," I mumbled.

"Then why lie?"

"I'm telling the truth," I lied stoutly.

I became angry because I knew that they knew that I was lying. I had lied to protect myself, then I had to lie to protect my lie. I had met so many whites who would have scorned or violently disapproved of what I had done in taking the examination that I could not have risked telling Mr. Hoffman. How could I now tell him that I had lied because I was unsure of myself? Lying was bad, but revealing my own insecurity would have been worse. It would have been shameful.

Their attitudes had proved utterly amazing. They were taking time out from their duties in the store to talk to me; I had never encountered anything like that from whites before. Either a white man would have said: "Get to hell out of here," or he would have said, "All right, boy, get to work." But no white people had ever stood their ground and probed and questioned me at such length before; it dawned upon me that they were treating me as an equal and, instead of its making me tell them why I had lied, it made it utterly impossible for me ever to do so. I felt that a confession now would have given them a moral advantage over me and that would have been unbearable.

"All right, stay and work," Mr. Hoffman said. "I know you're lying, but I don't care."

I wanted to quit, but I liked them in spite of myself. Yes, I had done wrong, but how on earth could I have known the kind of people for whom I was working? Perhaps Mr. Hoffman would have gladly consented for me to take the examination, but my guess as to what his attitude might be was far weaker than my powerful fears.

Richard Wright passed his Civil Service examination and, in the course of time, was appointed substitute clerk in the

United States Postal Service. This must have been in the fall of 1929 for he remembers walking along fondling the official notice of his fine new job and hearing the newsboys cry: "Stocks Crash! Billions Fade!"

He didn't care about the fading billions. He had a steady job. And by this time security meant a lot to this man whose life had been shifting and uncertain. More than pay and security, he prized the short and regular hours of the post office which left most of his day free for study and thinking and trying to write.

He began to meet other people who were thinking about prejudice and fear. He met other writers. He found companions among Socialists and Communists. He worked in the John Reed Club, argued, listened to the endless talk of those who wanted a new world. He began to learn that Negroes were not the only downtrodden people. He saw white men down and out—"as cowed and as bitter as any Mississippi 'nigger.'"

"I had to shift the pictures in my mind to take in white victims as well as black," he says. "That was a tough part of my education."

Meanwhile, the security of his post-office job began to totter. As the depression deepened, mail dropped so low that there was work only for the regular, senior clerks. Though he got a shining 94 per cent on a second examination and so moved up a rung on Civil Service rating, the volume of mail dropped faster than he rose.

In Chicago, in the trough of the depression, he lived through scenes of violence as brutal as any he had seen in the South: employment dropping 85 per cent in one year; rent riots; evicted Negroes shot by the police for trying to move back into their homes; Negro families shivering on the sidewalk where they and their things had been dumped by the landlord; death on the pavements.

In time he had to join the thousands on relief in Chicago. Happily, he did not have to take charity lying down. He had studied hard and he had tried to write, so he finally got a relief job on the Writers' Project of W.P.A. He was thankful, but amazed, at that break. "What is there," he thought, "to justify my being trusted with writing, let alone with looking into historical records?" But the heads of the Project thought better of him than he did—or else they just took relievers as they came along and set them at any job they said they could do. Anyway, he was set to writing. He worked on the records of the theater in Chicago, the history of Illinois—any tasks that were passed over to him. Since he had had a story, "Big Boy Leaves Home," published in the *New Caravan*, he was classified as "professional writer, temporarily out of work," and given a post as supervisor over a horde of budding authors trying to write essays.

He learned all he could about human beings by his long hours at the John Reed Club, in South Side pool rooms, anywhere he met and felt people. He learned all he could about writing from his fellows on the Writers' Project. He worked at short stories. "I spent hours and hours, that stretched into days, on the mere mechanics of making sentences. It was miserably hard work, but I was impelled to it."

He kept at it. He has always had a passion for work. And he drummed away on his typewriter, after W.P.A. hours, night after night: correcting, rewriting, tearing up, and starting all over again. Finally, with a sheaf of manuscripts that he thought pretty good, he decided to set off for New York to try to get on the Writers' Project there while he peddled his papers to magazines and publishers.

Meanwhile he had taken a third Civil Service examination and in May of 1937 he had to make a tough decision. Just as he was starting for New York he got notice that he had passed his examination with an almost perfect score and had

been awarded the goal of all his recent years: a regular, permanent postal clerkship at the staggering salary of \$2100 a year. Should he take this steady, secure job? Or should he stake all on trying to be a writer? "I tore up the notice of the appointment," he says, "thumbed a ride to New York—and have had hell and satisfaction ever since."

The decision to sink or swim by writing was a turning point in his career. Heretofore he had been concerned with making a living, simply writing on the side. Now he put writing first and took jobs only to eke out his budget. And success rushed to crown his devotion. While magazines were lukewarm about the stories he tried to peddle, *Harper's* snapped up five of them to make the book *Uncle Tom's Children*, which was such an immediate success that the magazines began to clamor for his stuff. The Writers' Project in New York gave him a modest, steady living while he went on with his writing. He was awarded a Guggenheim fellowship to free him for creative work.

Long before he went to New York, he had been working out in his mind a novel he wanted to write. Now he could give his whole energies to it. He had the materials from his own life and the understanding from his years of ravenous reading and tortured thinking. His theme, as he once expressed it, was "a man isn't born a 'nigger'; he is made into a 'nigger.'" He knew what he wanted to say, but for three suffering years he worked on the saying of it—weaving plot and incident so that the story would be gripping as well as brutal; testing every episode and feeling by the stern measuring rod "is it true?"

In October 1939 *Native Son* was published as a dual selection of the Book-of-the-Month Club. And overnight Richard Wright was famous.

In spite of its clear, cold terror, the book sold over 300,000 copies in this country and was translated into six languages.

His audience in Latin America and Russia is especially large. With the collaboration of Orson Welles and Paul Green, the story was made into a play as stark and brutal as the book. With Canada Lee playing honestly and brilliantly the almost impossible leading role of Bigger Thomas, the play stormed New York for many months and covered the country in long road tours. Movie companies made bids for the story, but so far no producer has been willing to put into pictures the realism that Wright insists upon.

The author had the solid satisfaction of knowing that there was no cheap sentiment in the popularity. This was certainly not a tale that "bankers' daughters could read and weep over and feel good about." The book was cursed as heartily as it was praised. People hated the scenes of ugly brutality, resented the theme that society was to blame for the crude crimes, rejected the picture of a Negro rebel as the Native Son of America. Wise readers quickly saw that this was the story not only of a miserable Negro boy, but in some degree of all individuals who are rejected by their world and who fight back in blind and futile fury.

Richard Wright had done what he set out to do. And he had every reason to be satisfied. He did not fear the criticisms of Negroes who did not want the sordid, brutal side of their society exposed. He did not mind the attacks of his left-wing friends who felt he had not properly stressed the class struggle. He had written honestly, and the world hailed his truth and his manner of telling it.

But he was not satisfied. He had to get a deeper understanding of the truth. So he began his education all over again.

He delved into the nature of social processes. He studied history and sociology, partly with the guidance of professors at Columbia and the University of Chicago but chiefly through his own avid reading and his direct observation of

masses in Chicago and New York. During this period he wrote *12 Million Black Voices*, a case study of a minority in America.

Then he plunged into the study of personality, especially the unconscious drives in torn and tortured individuals. He worked with psychiatrists, visited day after day, week after week, the mental hospitals and clinics in New York and Washington, read Freud and all his apostles, probed into reports of murders and riots, devoured everything he could get on the way personalities grow and become twisted and explode into violence. It is from this hard, deep study that his future writing will come, perhaps more powerful, certainly more keenly tempered, than anything he has yet done.

In 1940 Richard Wright married Ellen Poplar, a Jewish girl of New York City, whom he had met in one of the left-wing groups of earlier days. A daughter was born to them in 1942. These three make a close and loving family, and his social life is almost wholly at home. While he has lived as hard a life as any man in America, this has not embittered him. He is a gentle, friendly man. Handsome, poised, widely read in a hundred topics, he is a delightful companion. He is not, however, "hail-fellow-well-met." He does not often go to parties or night clubs. He seldom goes even to the theater or the movies. He has a small group of close friends whom he is always ready to welcome at his home. But it is hard to get him to make trips or even to go out for visits. For the most part, he lives alone with his typewriter and in the close circle of friends and his wife and child. He and his little family live in a century-old brownstone building near where the old Brooklyn Bridge ends on Brooklyn Heights. He chose Brooklyn for his home in order to be at the center of the creative world and yet avoid the frivolities and social pressures of Harlem or the distractions of the home-town crowd in Chicago.

He lives simply. When his wife was carrying her baby, he did the housework, and he is always ready to do his share of cleaning, dish washing, even cooking. He seems to have no regard for money. Of course he was pleased at the huge royalties from the book and the play. But apparently it did not occur to him to alter his way of living because of the new money. He bought a home in Chicago for his aged mother and is known to have responded generously to many cases of need. But he doesn't splurge in philanthropy any more than in his living. He rejects all offers to write on order for magazines or publishers, whatever the price. Yet, with a theme that interests him, he works weeks and months—and then gives it to some publication for a pittance or for nothing. He is said to have refused \$50,000 offered by the film studios if he would let them portray the characters in *Native Son* as white people, and he has turned down every offer, at any price, to allow the story to be softened or watered down for the movie public.

He is a terrific worker. His day is often seventeen hours of driving labor. In writing he makes five to ten separate drafts of chapters and sections before he gets what he wants. His painstaking labors come from his yearning for perfection in conveying his exact meaning and feeling. Working out some incident or idea, he digs into sources and facts with gluttonish zeal. When he wanted to use a poisoning scene in one of his stories he went to chemists for analyses and consulted ten different doctors on effects. He has pursued his interest in psychology so deeply that his professional knowledge of motives and behavior commands the respect of psychiatrists and psychoanalysts.

From earliest life, Wright has been fascinated by the emotion of fear. He knew an excess of fright in his own life as a black boy in the Deep South. He watched fear turn men sometimes into cowards, sometimes into bullies. Fear runs

through all of his stories. It is terror that has interested him most in the psychological studies he has made of motives and behavior.

He is so fascinated by the idea of fear that one wonders if he has cut himself off from every form of security, lest he lose touch in his own life with this elemental emotion. He early renounced the security of religion with its promise of salvation and heaven. As a boy he had little to tie him to his family and he has made no effort at all in later life to bind himself to them. He makes no attempt to use money as security. In spite of large returns from his writings, it seems never to have occurred to him to buy the security of a fashionable home with a retinue of servants. He has not even sought the security of his race. He never lost himself in the sprawling, friendly Negro group on the South Side of Chicago and, now that he has moved East, he has not joined the noisy Harlem crowd. Nor has he given himself the feeling of solidarity that comes to many through the fellowship of the Communist Party. A number of his warmest friends are in that group, and many of his ideas are one with theirs. But he refuses to follow any party line or be bound by any group.

"Though my heart is with the collectivist and proletarian ideal," he says, "something deeper than politics or race is at stake, and that is a *human* right, the right of a man to think and feel honestly."

He has clung to that right through all his suffering and struggle. Thinking and feeling honestly have led him to a deep understanding of the forces that create hatred and strife among men. His future books will probably be as hard and brutal as *Native Son*. He will perhaps continue to use Negro characters, for he knows their lives with a wealth of detail that would be hard to gain about any other group. But more and more his writing is likely to show the struggles



of human beings regardless of race or class. His stories are likely to grow more and more universal, to move more and more with the compelling fate of a Greek tragedy.

A native son of America, Richard Wright has special concern for the future of his race and his country. In *12 Million Black Voices* he speaks proudly of his people, voicing their demands and his own hope.

The differences between black folk and white folk are not blood or color, and the ties that bind us are deeper than those that separate us. The common road of hope which we all have traveled has brought us into a stronger kinship than any words, laws, or legal claims.

Look at us and know us and you will know yourselves, for we are you, looking back at you from the dark mirror of our lives!

We want what others have, the right to share in the upward march of American life, the only life we remember or have ever known.

The Lords of the Land say: "We will not grant this!"

We answer: "We ask you to grant us nothing. We are winning our heritage, though our toll in suffering is great!"

The Bosses of the Buildings say: "Your problem is beyond solution!"

We answer: "Our problem is being solved. We are crossing the line you dared us to cross, though we pay in the coin of death!"

The seasons of the plantation no longer dictate the lives of many of us; hundreds of thousands of us are moving into the sphere of conscious history.

We are with the new tide. We stand at the crossroads. We watch each new procession. The hot wires carry urgent appeals. Print compels us. Voices are speaking. Men are moving! And we shall be with them.\*

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# A SCHOLAR AND A GENTLEMAN



GORDON PARKS, O.W.I.

CHARLES S. JOHNSON

# A SCHOLAR AND A GENTLEMAN

**C**HARLIE JOHNSON began being a social scientist before he was out of short pants. As "boy" in the hotel barber shop of his home town in Virginia, he spent long days tending men who had their coats off, their guards down, and their minds loose. In such a place a colored attendant is unnoticed, just a part of the furnishings. The men paid no more attention to him than to the windows or the chairs. But he paid attention to them—to the white customers and to the colored barbers.

He was fascinated by the strange white world of fashion and business—and vulgarity—reflected by the lolling patrons whose tongues roamed as freely as their thoughts and feelings. He was fascinated by the barbers, especially by their talk and manners to the white customers, so different from their ways when at home with their own people. He wasn't shocked by what he saw and heard—neither pleased nor angered, just curious. From that time on he has made a business of being curious.

During a lifetime of watching and studying he has tried to bring some order and meaning out of the welter of things about him. He has tried to find out why people act the way they do; he has searched out the codes and traditions that create the patterns of acting and thinking. Naturally he has given much of his attention to the customs of the South and the patterns of race relations. All through his studies he has kept his own detachment, almost as apart from the hurly-burly as the boy in the Virginia barber shop. This "scientific

objectivity" surprises people. His colored friends scold him for being a calm student rather than a rabid reformer. White people get mad at his presumption in understanding them and their customs better than they do themselves.

A recent incident showed the essence of Johnson's service. A group of high-brows were visiting Gee's Bend, a colony of primitive, sturdy Negroes in central Alabama. There was a good deal of trouble in getting ideas back and forth between the natives and the visitors. Some of us, talking to an old man, were trying our best to find simple words that would make sense to him. But he just looked blank. Then, seeing Doctor Johnson, his face lighted up and he called: "Mistuh Johnson, Mistuh Johnson! Come on over hyar and understan' 'em fer me."

That was the highest tribute I ever heard paid to a sociologist. His job is to understand—to interpret—one person to another, one group of people to other groups. "Understandin' 'em fer us" is just what Doctor Johnson has spent his life doing—interpreting colored people to whites and white people to Negroes, Southerners to Northerners, rustics to city dwellers; analyzing people's problems so that they can understand themselves.

In the southern range of the Cumberland Mountains, the main street of the town of Bristol is the dividing line between Virginia and Tennessee. On the Virginia side of this town, in the quarters of the railroad workers, a brown baby was born on July 24, 1893, and named for the famous Baptist preacher of that day, Charles Spurgeon.

His surname was almost as much a matter of choice as his Christian names, for in the days following slavery Negroes took any designations they pleased. Many of them chose the names of the planters they had served; others took the name of some "noble family" of the region, or whatever title

struck their fancy. The hundreds of colored Washingtons, for example, are not all former slaves or relatives of the father of his country. And the Quirks and Jeeters, the Whites and Browns and Pinks are often just pleasing sounds that caught the ear of some ex-slave. Of the brothers freed on one of the Virginia plantations, one took the name of Jones, and the other—the father of the brown baby of Bristol—chose the surname Johnson.

The early lives of the freedmen were as haphazard as their names. Some went right on working for their former masters. Many were crushed or deranged by the burden of a life without someone to direct and feed them. Some struck off at once to climb the rough path of independence.

Charlie Johnson's father was among the fortunate. The master of the home in which his mother had served took an interest in the boy. With a whim of *noblesse oblige* not uncommon in that day, the Virginia scholar took on himself the task of schooling this brown boy along with his own white son. He drilled the astonished ex-slave in Latin and Greek and Hebrew, gave him a thorough grounding in English and American literature, and filled him with an abounding faith in God and the Baptist Church. After the home tutoring, both boys went to Richmond for higher learning: the white lad to Richmond College, and the colored one to Richmond Institute (now part of Virginia Union University) where in 1883 he received the degree of Bachelor of Divinity.

Tucking his diploma away in an old tin trunk, the young preacher set out to put his theology to service. For two years he rode the mule trails of the Virginia hills, preaching and teaching among his people. In the course of his travels he met and married, in the mountain city of Lynchburg, a beautiful octoroon, Winifred Branch.

His Lynchburg bride joined heartily with her husband in

a mission to save the Negro workers of the raw railway town of Bristol, where the sacrament of marriage was as rare as that of baptism. In the small Anglo-Baptist church, where the new preacher held forth, there were no hymnals and there was little knowledge of formal music. So the bride made up melodies, weaving bits of spirituals and work songs and her own imagination into airs which to this day are favored in that region over the standard tunes of well-known gospel hymns.

Church services were only part of the mission to which the couple set themselves. The Reverend C. H. Johnson was small and slight, but every ounce of his 125 pounds bristled with courage and zeal. He set out to convert to orderly living, as well as to Christ, the bellowing John Henrys of the railroad camps. He carried his gospel straight into the quarters of sin and riot. Young Charles never knew his father to spare himself. Many a time the preacher was called out of bed at midnight to tend the sick, to comfort the stricken, to settle quarrels in sections that most people avoided even by day. The little man was as fearless of white toughs as of black. Once as a lynch mob came roaring up his street, he reared his five feet four inches of moral courage right in their path. While the gang threatened to hang him beside the victim they were dragging along, he stood his ground so that the men had to shuffle around him to get past, while he cursed their evil, quoted Scripture against their violence, and prayed for their change of heart. This mob was too far gone in blood lust to be stopped. But the whole town was so shamed by the orgy and by the preacher's rebukes, which echoed in white churches as well as colored, that no lynching has ever again threatened Bristol.

The little Baptist church became the rallying ground for the whole colored community, and for forty-three years

this preacher was its Good Shepherd. Charles Johnson recalls with pride and affection the burdens his father willingly took on: spiritual advisor, legal and business counsel, guardian and banker, nurse and doctor, tutor and social worker. Remembering his guidance in their growth from a rowdy railway camp to an orderly and thriving community, a grateful people have named the federal housing project for Negroes in Bristol "Johnson Courts."

Under the hand of that little giant Charles Johnson grew up, the eldest of five children. He watched with awe the power of his father's spirit over the violent laborers and ungodly gangs. He felt the power himself in the stern demands of the old man for "better work, my son, much better work." He spent long days of his boyhood poring over the strange volumes of classics and theology in his father's library. He pondered the differences between the members of the fashionable white churches and his father's humble flock. As he worked in the barber shop or wandered about the town, this pondering became an obsession—which scholars later called a science.

Since there was no high school for Negroes in Bristol, Charles went off for his upper schooling to Wayland Academy, then a part of Virginia Union University, in Richmond. He stayed right on until he finished both academy and college, receiving his A.B. degree in 1917. As he worked every summer, he did not see much of home after he was fourteen. But the family ties have always been close. Charles went back whenever he could and never made any big decisions until he had talked them over with his wise father and his doting mother.

The mother from the first was mighty proud of her eldest son. The worst quarrel reported in the family was when she entered baby Charles in a beauty contest only to have



him passed over by a jury of which his father was chairman. But even Charles' most admiring friends have to admit: "Well, after all!"

At school and college Charles is remembered as studious, quiet, and even shy. But he was full of quiet pranks, too. He seems to have centered his social studies at that time on seeing how far rules—of which there were plenty at this Baptist school—could be bent without breaking. Since the curfew rule was that dormitory doors be locked at eight o'clock, he observed it literally, simply using windows, fire escapes, and hanging vines as a means of getting in and out "when it seemed desirable to do so." Since the rules forbade the use of tobacco, he and his chums found that dried corn silk could be rolled into grand cigarettes. Once he was almost sent home—a crushing disgrace—because he was seen in a pool room. But he squirmed out of that by proving that he couldn't play pool—and he can still prove it today.

For the subject of his oration at graduation from the academy, he chose an analysis of certain conflicts in philosophic thinking. His hard-headed New England teacher rejected the topic as beyond the capacity of a schoolboy. But the lad persisted, and the matter was carried to the president, George Rice Hovey, that distinguished scholar whose early influence did so much to set the tone of this Negro mission school. After dogged debate the president also vetoed the project. Charles was so angry at this questioning of his profundity that he set out to read every volume on philosophy in the college library, whether he understood it or not. He devoured dozens of tomes until he finally bogged down in Hegel. Thereupon he chose for his valedictory the dullest subject he could think of: the conservation of natural resources. He wrote and delivered his speech with such white anger that, far from being dull, it was a moving attack on the wastes that were eating away the natural wealth of the

South, and it stirred in the student himself an interest in saving the southern countryside that has long outlasted his perplexities over what Hegel was trying to say.

Happily, the college department of Virginia Union was inspiring enough to draw most of the young man's surplus spirits into study and work. So he set out on another exploration, to see how much study and how many different jobs one student could carry.

He cleaned the dormitory from 5:30 to 7:00 every morning, and several times each week served as special waiter at Murphy's Hotel. He was monitor in the library three hours a night, six nights a week, and in the course of this service read a large part of the miscellaneous collection of books in his custody. A football accident toward the end of high school, which left a kidney floating aimlessly around inside him, limited his college athletics to tennis, but did not keep him from being manager of the football and baseball teams. He sang baritone on the college quartet and bass on an even more exciting quartet which included two voices from the near-by girls' school, Hartshorn. He was on the college debating team. He was editor-in-chief of the college journal and president of the Student Council. With all his self-supporting labor and student activities, he found time to specialize in sociology, to do some first-hand social research, and to complete the four-year college course with high honors in three years.

His labor was as educative as his schooling. During vacations, after shopping around as stevedore, ditch digger, and mess boy, he finally got a steady job for the three summers as watchman on one of the steamers running between New York and Providence. He eked out the slender pay by carrying bags and running errands at the various ports of call, but he valued the post chiefly because it kept him awake with practically nothing to do ten hours every night. Dur-

ing these long watches he read endlessly and covered in advance most of the texts for the coming college year.

In the Christmas vacation of his last year in college, he had an experience so stark that it sealed his interest in social problems. Checking applicants for Christmas baskets for the Richmond Welfare Association, he stumbled one afternoon into a basement room of a tumble-down shack and found a girl alone, on a pile of rags, groaning in labor. He rushed out for a doctor, but those he found "had no time to attend." He finally got a midwife who saw the girl through. Then he set out to have the girl cared for on some lasting basis. He went first to her family, and was shocked at their cold refusal to take her home or even to speak to her. He tried to get other families to take her in, only to meet the same scorn. He tried institutions and found obstacles, sometimes because she was colored, other times "because she had sinned." In the midst of his earnest crusade the girl vanished. He never saw her again, nor heard of her. But he has never been able to get out of his mind that Christmas tragedy, nor to cease pondering the anger of people at a human catastrophe while they calmly accept conditions that cause it.

To learn more about social problems he turned to a summer of social work in Richmond and then to graduate study at the University of Chicago. Always practical, he got the money to continue his educational self-help by a prize essay on "Self-Help in College."

In the fall of 1917, on his first trip North or to any big city, he arrived in Chicago with \$1.95 in his pocket. He knew he had to get a job before the sun went down if he expected to sleep and eat, to say nothing of meeting later tuition costs. Lugging his heavy bag, he told his story to every prosperous and kindly looking man he met. The third man he stopped shouted, "You're the fellow I'm looking

for," and led him to the kitchen of a little family hotel on Dorchester Avenue. Within an hour he had begun to earn his board and keep. Waiting table at this hotel, doing every job he could get his hands on, working as much as he could on tasks that had some bearing on his social studies, he earned every dollar of his expenses at the University just as he had in school and college.

At Chicago he was thrilled to sit under Professor Albion W. Small, author of his college textbook, whose ponderous lectures, dignified manners, and trim beard were just what he expected in a major professor. But Robert E. Park was the man who moved him. As time went on, this "father of American sociology" became an influence in his life second only to his own father. With Park's stimulus and his own eagerness, he was soon in the midst of the many problems of employment, housing, and conflict set in motion by the streams of Negroes then swarming from the rural South to the northern cities. Before the end of his first year in Chicago he had started the research department of the new Urban League, created a fresh pattern in social study by an analysis of the Negro group in Milwaukee, and, under a Carnegie grant, launched a survey of the huge shifts in Negro population throughout the country. At twenty-five Johnson was already a figure to be reckoned with in social research.

But war was becoming the most pressing of all problems, and Johnson couldn't stay out of anything so big and exciting. He enlisted early in 1918 and spent a year under arms, chiefly in France, coming out as Regimental Sergeant Major. On the way home from the war he ran into a series of riots, in Brest and Norfolk and Washington, and arrived at the University just a week before the worst of them all, the Chicago race riot of 1919.

Johnson's love of being in the thick of things was abun-

dantly fulfilled in this Chicago riot. As he walked toward his office at the Urban League on Wabash Avenue, he saw a man stabbed to death on the steps of the building. He himself was shot at. Cut off by the milling mobs from his rooms near the University, he ran onto fresh bursts of rioting all the way from the Loop to the Midway.

As he dodged bullets, dragged wounded friends to safety, and telephoned for police help at the hottest spots, his busy brain reviewed the acts and angers that had brought about this tumult:

Mass migration, like unto the flight of the children of Israel out of Egypt, half a million black folk pouring up from the poverty and persecution of the southern rurals, hungry for the wages and freedom of the Promised Land, northern cities overrun by black migrants fresh from the cotton and tobacco fields, lost in the frenzy of city slums, noisy factories, freezing winters.

The new Negro newspapers of the North whooping it up for the exodus, "I beg of you, my brethren, to leave that benighted land. You are free men . . . Your neck has been in the yoke . . . To die from the bite of frost is more glorious than to die from the rope and faggots of the mob."

A hundred thousand Negroes swarming into the single city of Chicago, "God's country" to the masses along the Mississippi bottoms, houses overflowing, rents soaring, black hordes pouring into forbidden territory, swarming over yesterday's fashionable boulevards of the South Side, Prairie Avenue, Grand Boulevard, South Parkway, and everywhere no repairs, bad plumbing, no gas, no heat, no water.

Grumbling and jostling as white soldiers back from the war clamor for jobs now filled by Negroes, guerilla warfare, gangs of young hoodlums chasing Negroes down back alleys feeling the thrill of battle and the joy of duty well done for their race.

When Charles Johnson finally reached his university quarters he knew he had been in the midst of one of the great conflicts of modern times, something as significant perhaps as the war he had just come from in Europe. He knew too that this was part of the same rioting he had seen in Norfolk and Washington, that was crackling in Helena, Arkansas, in East St. Louis, and Atlanta. Without washing the blood stains off his clothes, he sat down and wrote out a detailed plan for a study of the Chicago riot as a symptom of the social and economic conflicts of the time.

Governor Lowden promptly appointed a commission of leading white and colored citizens to survey the riot and to find remedies for conditions that clearly could no longer be tolerated. Johnson was called as a routine witness. Instead of testimony, he presented the plan for the study that he had so carefully prepared. The commission was staggered—and delighted. The plan was accepted and Johnson was appointed to see it through as aide to the secretary of the commission, Graham R. Taylor, son of the famed head of Chicago Commons.

As he started his work, Johnson reviewed the scene:

Hates and angers and confusions touched off to wild explosion by a single incident at a South Side bathing beach on that historic Sunday, July 27, 1919, a seventeen-year-old colored boy swimming into the area used by whites, a shower of stones, the boy sinking to his death, angry Negroes collecting on the beach, police refusing to arrest the white offenders and beating up the Negroes, a colored man firing at the police and being himself shot down, terror spreading as night came, mobs of blacks and whites meeting, fighting with fists, shooting, stabbing.

Sporadic fighting all day Monday, roaring into rioting and killing as darkness of the second day came on, the whole

phantasmagoria turning to nightmare in a car strike Monday midnight, tying up all traffic on surface and elevated lines, men walking to work and stopping to fight, automobiles speeding through the hot dusty streets of the black belt, armed hoodlums firing through windows and doors and into the milling crowds on the streets.

Negro homes burning, mobs everywhere, chasing their victims even into the downtown business streets, the police helpless, a city seized with panic, twenty-five Negroes slain, fifteen white people killed, 538 persons, white and black, wounded before state troops and a lucky rainstorm quelled the rioters.

The study lasted two years. In the course of it Johnson made lasting friendships with members of the commission, especially Victor Lawson of the *Daily News*, Dr. George Cleveland Hall, the leading Negro member, and Julius Rosenwald. The 600-page report, *The Negro in Chicago*, is known as one of the landmarks in social research.

Calls poured in upon this brilliant student to make study after study of the migrating Negroes, their clashes and adjustments, in a score of cities into which they were still swarming. Interested in seeing his studies result in action, he gladly tied his work to the Urban League, a national agency called into being by the war and the northern migration. His surveys in Baltimore, Trenton, Hartford, East St. Louis, Fort Wayne, Buffalo, and Los Angeles stated the problem and outlined the programs that branches of the Urban League should tackle in those cities to help Negroes get employment, find houses, make their way through the maze of hurdles that were being thrown up in the new northern settings.

In 1921 he moved his headquarters to the central office of the Urban League in New York. But before he left the Midwest he carried through a piece of unfinished business that

had started during his first year at the University. He married the girl he had courted for three years.

It was while he was making one of his early studies in Milwaukee that he first heard of a young woman, "the most competent member of our community," who unfortunately was away at the time teaching at a girls' school near Chicago. When he got back to the University he thought he would look up this prodigy and listen to any ideas she might think she had on his report. He went to see her, chuckling over her flossy name, Marie Antoinette Burgette, and expecting a dull evening with a stuck-up young high-brow. She calmly commended part of his report, tore the rest to pieces, and pointed out a dozen things he had missed. While he was still mumbling scholarly "ums" and "ahs," she said, "Let's go dance." She didn't rate his dancing much above his report, but she seemed willing to give a good deal of time to polishing both. And he kept coming around, baffled by her assurance, fascinated by her combination of brains and glamour.

When he got back from France, he found the girl in the midst of war camp community service and the teaching of dancing. Their courtship was a series of incidents in the hurly-burly of each other's jobs. He found himself lugging stage props or rescuing the teacher and her charges from some remote park at times most inconvenient to his university schedule, or trying to look romantic sitting around back-stage amid a riot of scantily clad teen-age girls in their first play. She in turn struggled over his reports and tried, in vain, to check his statistical charts. So they got married.

After twenty-three years Marie still criticizes his writing and has almost given up hope of making him a graceful dancer. But in all these years she has shown the full meaning of the good old folk word, "helpmeet."

In New York Johnson soon took the center of another movement almost as challenging as the riots. As part of the



work of the National Urban League, he founded *Opportunity*, a journal of Negro life. While at first the magazine stressed social reports, the young editor set out to make it a channel for Negro expression in all fields. When *Opportunity* started there were not more than fifteen or twenty Negroes doing any writing and few of them for the magazines. Charles Johnson began to hunt for new talent. He urged his friends to write. He canvassed the schools and colleges. As papers began to come in, he got well-known writers and critics to read them and tell the budding authors what was good about their work and what was bad. Young Negroes took new heart as they found that celebrities would criticize their stuff and that a magazine would publish it when it was good enough.

Interest boiled with the starting of prize contests for best poems, essays, and stories of the year, and came to climax in the annual dinners given for the winners. Top literary figures judged the manuscripts and came to the banquets to meet the eager youngsters. Carl Van Doren, Zona Gale, Fannie Hurst, and John Dewey were among the sympathetic critics. Henry Goddard Leach, Van Wyck Brooks, Carl Van Vechten, Maxwell Bodenheim, and Paul Green were regular guests at the gala dinners. An amazing roster of young Negro writers, then almost unknown, came out in the early issues of this magazine. Langston Hughes was a prize winner with his *Weary Blues*, and Zora Hurston with one of her short stories of Deep South primitives. Arna Bon-temps and James Weldon Johnson, Countee Cullen and Sterling Brown, Jean Toomer and Claude McKay, were among the steady contributors. Abram Harris, Ira Reid, and Franklin Frazier published papers on economics and sociology. Alain Locke was an eager aide in hunting out fresh talent and beating the drum for Negro themes.

The magazine reproduced paintings and carvings by

Negroes and in its comments gave many a timely boost to such young artists as Aaron Douglas, Richmond Barthé, Augusta Savage, and E. Simms Campbell. Music was hailed also: the compositions of W. C. Handy, the father of the blues, and of an almost unknown young composer working with him, William Grant Still, the rhythmic lyrics of Rosamond Johnson, the creations and arrangements of John Work, Nathaniel Dett, and Clarence Cameron White. These were the days of the "New Negro." And Johnson and his magazine, *Opportunity*, were a lively leaven in creating what came to be called the "Negro Renaissance."

In 1928 Charles Johnson finally moved into that post toward which all his study and work had been tending: the headship of a great university institute of social science. With the reorganization of Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee, he became professor in charge of its division of social studies. Ever since, he has been teaching, directing field studies, and doing all the many tasks of a major research professor. His department has become one of the great institutes of the country, comparable to the centers at the University of Chicago and the University of North Carolina. While at a Negro university, this institute is bi-racial both in faculty and in the eager body of advanced students who work and study there. In this happy setting Johnson works easily and effectively.

He has served his nation and his race in so many capacities that even a catalogue of his achievements is impressive. Passing over honorary degrees, special awards, memberships on national boards and learned societies, a few of his feats can be shown in a list of his books, each one of which is the climax of years of study and labor in the given field.

*The Negro in Chicago*, the first of his studies of local communities.

*The Negro in American Civilization*, a 500-page ency-

lopedia compiled from materials assembled for the National Interracial Conference. *Economic Status of the Negro* is a companion volume issued in 1933 after a national conference on that particular phase of Negro life.

*Shadow of the Plantation*, a very human study in 1934 of the decay of the plantation system in an Alabama black-belt county. This "best seller" among social texts is a devastating analysis of one of the cancers on our body politic. The tone of this readable book is shown by these verses by Sterling Brown that are its introduction:

Ole King Cotton,  
Ole Man Cotton,  
Keeps us slavin'  
Till we'se dead an' rotten.

Ef flood don't git us  
It's de damn bo' weevil,  
Crap grass in de drought,  
Or sump'n else evil;

Some planters goes broke,  
An' some gits well,  
But dey sits on deir bottoms  
Feelin' swell;  
An' us in de crap grass  
Catchin' hell.

Cotton, cotton,  
All we know;  
Plant cotton, hoe it,  
Baig it to grow;  
What good it do to us  
Gawd only know! \*

*Preface to Racial Understanding*, a cool, dispassionate text, written in 1934, for use in colleges and study groups. *Race Relations*, written a year later in collaboration with

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\* The poem appeared originally in *Southern Road* by Sterling Brown, and is reprinted here with the permission of the publisher, Harcourt, Brace and Company.

Dr. W. D. Weatherford, gives a fuller treatment of the same subject.

*The Collapse of Cotton Tenancy*, written in 1935, in collaboration with Edwin R. Embree and W. W. Alexander. This brief, trenchant story was a chief force in bringing into being the Farm Security Administration and in focusing attention on the need for drastic reorganization of farm practices in the South.

*The Negro College Graduate*, a report in 1938 on the swift rise in the higher education of this tenth of the American population, which received the Anisfield Award for the most distinguished book of the year dealing with race.

*Statistical Atlas of Southern Counties*, a compendium of detailed information on 1104 counties of thirteen southern states, gathered and compiled during the years 1936 to 1941.

*Growing Up in the Black Belt*, a study of the many forces and handicaps that go into the education of colored children in the southern rurals, published in 1941 in the series of surveys of the American Council on Education.

*Patterns of Negro Segregation*, a forthright and comprehensive assembly of facts about racial segregation in various aspects of American life, published in 1943.

Johnson's special tasks have often been colorful as well as basic. Toward the end of 1928 he was called by the United States Department of State to serve as the American member of the League of Nations Commission of Three to investigate slavery and forced labor in Liberia. Nine months' work by the Commission in Africa brought about sweeping changes: the formal abolition of slavery, the suppression of labor exportation, the resignation of the Liberian President and his cabinet, and the inauguration of a new government that has brought health, stability, and some prosperity to this African nation.

In the course of the Commission's work Johnson found time to gather a wealth of material on native African life

and cultures. His eager curiosity devoured the folk life of this great continent. He visited many villages, sat in long palavers with the chiefs, took part in native ceremonies. With painstaking care he made phonograph records of African rituals, talks, songs. He is one of the few students of the American Negro who has extended his observations to the African homeland.

During recent years, Johnson has taken special interest in rural education. He has long known that rural schools, both white and colored, are formal and academic, shockingly unrelated to the life about them. Too many children, he believes, simply get rote teaching in certain mental tricks of book larnin', much as animals are trained to do tricks in a circus.

He drives home his pleas for reform by reporting cases that he has seen with his own eyes in the course of his wide studies of the southern rurals.

In Louisiana a teacher with her textbook on her lap asked, "Johnnie, when do the robins come?" And Johnnie answered promptly, "In the fall." "No, no," the teacher scolded. "Read page 44 of your lesson. Now, when do the robins come?" The boy, almost in tears, at last was made to say, "In the spring." And so they do—in Boston where the text was written. But in Louisiana, to get away from the cold winters of the North, they come in the fall. "What better way," asks Johnson, "for children to be taught that books are bunk, or that there is no relation between life and school?"

In many southern states three citizens in each district form a kind of board for the local school. Often the stupidity of these "deestricht trustees" is a drag rather than a help. A teacher in a tumble-down one-room school, anxious to show off before a visitation of the "deestricht trustees," asked a boy: "Who signed the Magna Charta?" The boy didn't know (and there's no reason why he should). After scrap-

ing one bare foot against the other, he muttered, "I dunno. I didn't do it!" and started for his seat. A trustee—as watchful as a member of the Dies Committee—shouted, "Teacher, call that boy back! I don't like his face. I'll bet he done it!"

Health classes, which should be practical if anything is, often have the least connection with life, being simply rote "lessons" in a textbook. Johnson reports dozens of schools—hundreds of them—where pupils recite in droning chorus: "We take a bath every day; we brush our teeth after every meal; we eat proteins and vitamins and drink two pints of milk," when it was evident to all the senses that the children hadn't bathed in weeks, never owned a toothbrush, wouldn't recognize proteins and vitamins if they saw them on the table—and couldn't get them if they knew what they were.

It is by such homely observations that Charles Johnson builds up his convincing reports. He is interested in learning the facts and their causes in order to find the cure. Although first of all a student, he has no silly ideas about the virtue of research for its own sake or the untouchable purity of science. No one can taunt him with the wisecrack, "When you steal from one author it's plagiarism; when you steal from many it's research." While he cons diligently the work of others, his findings come from direct observations and fresh insights.

Johnson believes in investing in young people. As editor of *Opportunity* he saw how much could be done by giving a boost to budding genius. At Fisk his main task—and joy—is to help able students grow and find their powers. One of his chief interests as a working trustee of the Rosenwald Fund is to search out bright youngsters and give them a leg up. And he has helped that Fund not only to aid young Negroes but also to give "a chance for advanced study and fresh air" to white Southerners. He has a nose for budding talent. He took chances on many young writers in *Oppor-*

tunity, and he is always urging long shots by the Fund on youngsters who show signs of genius even though their general records are only middling or even ragged. Sometimes these long shots collapse with a dull plop. Sometimes what he smells is not genius but sour dough. But in many cases he has seen talent long before anyone else suspected it, even sooner than the person himself. Just as Mary Bethune has helped raise the colored masses, so Charles Johnson has helped develop the cream of racial and regional leaders.

Doctor Johnson's years of careful work and study are flowering into spectacular service to the nation during the war emergency. With democracy challenged at home as well as abroad, he is one of the men the country is turning to for wise and workable answers. He has been called by the United States Department of Agriculture to help formulate plans for the extension of the democratic process to rural areas. He is a member of the Committee of the Federal Children's Bureau on Wartime Care and Post-war Planning for Children. As representative of the public on the Department of Labor's Committee on Fair Labor Standards, he has helped set emergency wages and standards for southern railways and for the tobacco and textile industries.

He is on the organizing committee of the new Southern Regional Council. He was leader and spokesman for the Conference of Southern Negroes which issued the epochal statement of what thoughtful Negroes are willing to accept in race relations, known as the Durham Charter of 1943. While continuing to direct the Institute of Social Studies at Fisk, he was in 1943 made co-director of the Julius Rosenwald Fund's Division of Race Relations and director of the race relations program of the American Missionary Association of the Congregational Church.

Naturally his career has roused criticism as well as praise. Radicals say he is too conservative, too willing to compro-

mise, and he admits that he believes in step by step rather than in sweeping revolution. Some people think he is too calm in the face of the evils he is studying, though his record in bringing about lasting reforms gives pause to those critics.

An example of the criticism his fellows sometimes hurl at him is this comment on his book, *The Negro in American Civilization*:

This book . . . is an amazingly skillfully edited collection of . . . paper studies from many hands, rewritten, reshuffled, but with a canny eye to avoid all controversy, excised of all meaning, expurgated of all views or conclusions, as though a social outlook were almost an indecent thing in social research.

These data are mounted on tables, charted, graphed, curved in broken and unbroken lines, statistized, mean averaged, correlated to each other but to no social issue, and above all sterilized of significance.

He has been criticized for catering to powerful white interests, as for example in this comment:

Doctor Johnson is a very shrewd man, who is working indefatigably to interest the great "foundations," the vast philanthropies, the agencies of "scientific" social work—in short, the *noblesse oblige* of American wealth—in the social economy of the American Negro. And the secretariat of this *noblesse oblige* wants data and not trouble.

Some find him too earnest. "Sure he's a scholar and a gentleman," one friend said, "but why doesn't he ever give over?"

He has a reputation for driving his staff. "No wonder his output is so great; his assistants work their fingers off." Yet his secretaries are fervent in their loyalty, and the morale of his hard-working office is high year in and year out.



In the course of his active career he has not avoided stepping on some toes, and the shadow of his greatness has grieved lesser people. Negroes, like other minority groups, are rife with petty jealousies, and Johnson has suffered his fair share of envy and spleen. But he goes right on helping and boosting enemies and friends alike, and his stature is now so widely recognized that attacks become less easy and less satisfying to the envious herd.

Johnson is no pedant. His company is a joy as well as an inspiration. He is a gentleman in his modest manners and consideration of others. He is a man of the world with the poise that comes of wide travel, abundant knowledge, and mellow philosophy. During the years when he helped create the "Negro Renaissance," he seemed to suffer no pain in doing his duty by the Harlem night clubs. After Langston Hughes gave a series of talks at Fisk, including tales of some Harlem incidents shared by Johnson, the students who usually greet him with a courteous "Good afternoon, Doctor Johnson," sang out when they next met him, "Hi, Prof!" He has a wide knowledge of music, literature and art, and he knows the joys of friends and song and talk. When he tells Negro stories, as he often does, he finds it so hard to twist his careful English into the southern Negroid drawl that his accent is sometimes as funny as his stories.

The most surprising thing about him is his constant air of ease and leisure. He is in demand every week in Washington, Chicago, New York, New Orleans, Los Angeles, all over the country. He travels thousands of miles every month, often amid the discomforts that attend Negroes however distinguished they may be. His appointments are set months in advance, and he prepares diligently for every meeting. At Fisk he puts in a fourteen-hour day of teaching and studying and writing. The top floor of his Nashville house shows a light far into every morning as he reads, makes notes, and

talks into dictaphones that keep a corps of typists busy. But he never seems driven or even busy. He gives abundant time to students and callers. He can always take on another meeting anywhere in the country "at any time convenient to the others." And he gives unhurried time to his family. His wife and his three sons and one daughter get more easy fellowship from him than many families where the father doesn't do a thing.

He seems to lead a charmed life. He has missed sudden death half a dozen times by what look like miracles. One night in his Chicago days, as he was running back to his college room in a rainstorm, he unknowingly stepped over a fallen live wire only to hear the death rattle of a man behind him, whose foot had come squarely on it. At another time, trying to push a letter onto a moving train, he slipped under the rumbling mail car—but rolled right out to the other side untouched. During the First World War in France his company was under fire continuously for twenty-two days—and he did not get a scratch. During his tour of Liberia, where there was great bitterness against the reforms planned by his Commission, he decided at the last minute not to get off the train at one of the scheduled stops. Of the men who did get off, an Armenian of his general build and looks, evidently mistaken for him, was seized by political gangsters and drowned. During this same visit to Africa, as he was sleeping in his outdoor tent, there was a leopard raid on the village, in which one man was killed and another badly maimed. One of the beasts began to tear the mosquito netting off his bed when Johnson, not knowing what it was all about, turned on his flashlight and began patiently fixing the netting back in place. Fortunately, his host rushed down with flares and beaters and held the animals at bay while he dragged the still half-sleeping professor to the safety of the chief's house within the stockade.

It is a life worth saving. Charles Johnson has one of America's great careers in scholarship and statesmanship. He ranks among the leading social scientists of the nation, among the two or three toppers of the South, regardless of race. And his record of reforms is as brilliant as his research. He is physician to the body politic, carefully diagnosing social ills so that he can cure them and prevent them, so that he can help America build toward a full and wholesome democracy.

# LITTLE DAVID



NEWSWEEK

WALTER WHITE

# LITTLE DAVID

**W**ALTER WHITE has been fighting giants all his life. He is as full of zest as Little David, the shepherd boy. He is as fierce an enemy of the Philistines in our society as the great King David of Israel. And every campaign is to him as personal as the Biblical duel between David and Goliath.

As an officer of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, for twenty-five years he has fought to win full rights and opportunities for the darker tenth of our population. He has stirred the country against lynchings, fought for equal schools for all the people, equal salaries for teachers, equal facilities in all the public services. Dead set against compromise, he is willing to lose a whole battle rather than accept a partial victory. Some say he is the most effective champion of civil rights in America today. Others say he is a stumbling block to progress, which to be lasting must be slow and gradual. He says a nation cannot exist half democrat, half Nazi.

Son of a fair-skinned Georgia postman and his fair-skinned wife, Walter White is a blue-eyed blond. He is so light that no one thinks of him as having Negro blood. And he is one of the few colored men who can boast—in reverse of the old southern tradition—that he had a white “mammy.” When he was born his mother was so run down that she had no milk, so a white neighbor, with a baby just a few days older, generously suckled Walter through his infancy. He can say in the best southern manner, though he is careful not to say it too often: “Why, I know white folks and love

them—in their place. My old Georgia mammy was white.”

He was born in Atlanta on July 1, 1893, the second son in a family of two boys and five girls, and grew up not very differently from other middle-class boys in this busy, newly rich metropolis of the South. His family lived in a big frame house with a rambling yard on Houston Street, a decent section of town with white families on one side and Negroes on the other.

If he had been born just one block farther west, into a family which did not recognize its colored blood, he would have been a college hero, a hustling businessman or political figure, a personage renowned for his quickly gained wealth, his conquests among the ladies, his hosts of friends and hangers-on—the typical success of that go-getting age. But he was born a hundred yards too far east. And of parents who, in spite of their fair skins, were known to be “colored” and so subject to all the bars of America’s color caste.

Walter’s earliest memories are of stern discipline in a deeply religious home, of endless chores, and of much gay rollicking. On week days he went to school from eight to two o’clock and crowded as much work and play as he could into the hours before a firm “early to bed.” On Sundays he and the whole family followed the strict rituals of a godly household of those days. Coming solemnly together in the parlor at exactly eight o’clock, the children took turns in reading aloud chapters from the Bible. Then, all kneeling, the father would talk eloquently and intimately to God in prayer. After a steaming breakfast, the children were bundled off to Sunday school at the colored Congregational church around the corner, to be joined at eleven o’clock by the grown-ups for the long church service. After dinner each went to his own room for quiet reading of nothing more frivolous than an English classic of at least fifty years’ standing. Any such books as *Elsie Dinsmore* and *Huckle-*

*berry Finn* were "not for Sunday." Nor was the studying of school lessons, for "six days shalt thou labor and do all thy work."

While his father never whipped him, Walter remembers several times when he gave him so stern a "talking-to" in the solemn atmosphere of the parlor that he felt worse, and more repentant, than after any physical punishment. His mother had no such qualms about the switch. And if it ever turned out that a whipping was not deserved for the cause she had in mind, she still felt it was a good investment, "sure to be needed for something else just as bad." But both parents were as fair in defending the children as in punishing them.

One of the forbidden joys was to drink at a pump which stood over a horse trough at the corner of Houston and Courtland Streets. The water was apt to be dirty, and the pump often turned into a battle ground between whites and Negroes. Once, slyly disobeying the rule, Walter was leaning over the pump trying to catch the dripping water in his mouth when a gang of white boys sneaked up, smashed his head against the spout, and ran away shouting: "Nigger, Nigger! Drink blood from that pump!" In swift anger he flung a stone which grazed the head of one of the white boys and made him stumble and fall. Walter was scared. He had committed the unforgivable sin of striking back at a white person.

He dashed home and shouted, "Mamma, please whip me!"

Puzzled, she said, "I've no doubt you need it, but why?"

"Don't waste time," he cried, "just whip me hard!"

His mother burst out laughing, and Walter blurted out the whole story. Just then the mother of the boy he had hit rushed in demanding instant punishment of the "black tough" who had set upon her "poor sweet boy who never harmed anybody." Mrs. White turned on her, told her the true story, cried shame on a gang of white rowdies attacking



a single little colored boy, and sent the woman off actually apologizing.

Walter stalked out from where he had hidden during the white woman's tirade, feeling himself a hero from his mother's fervent defense, only to have her cry: "Get me that switch! I'll teach you not to drink out of that dirty pump."

But most of Walter's youth had nothing to do with punishment or defense, just work and boyish good times. He had a fair voice and sang in choirs and glee clubs and wherever two or three of his cronies were gathered together. He played baseball with the school teams and in the romping games of pitch and catch in the streets and vacant lots. His career in dramatics suffered a cruel hurt when, as the hero in *The Taming of the Shrew*, he picked up the plump girl who was playing Katherine, stalked off the stage with her in his none-too-stout arms, and fell clattering down the stage steps with her bouncing on top of him right into the howling audience of his schoolmates.

A more quiet pleasure was driving with his father in his mail cart as he collected the letters and parcels on his afternoon circuit. These were thrilling trips for the boy: the cart with the imposing name of the United States Government blazoned on its sides, the busy streets and the fine houses, the joy of having his shy, dignified father talk to him as friend and companion. They talked of the Russo-Japanese War that filled the papers when Walter was thirteen years old. They talked often of goodness and evil and of the duty of hard work and loyalty to the right. Walter didn't understand all of it. And he would have liked more of the talk to be about baseball and girls and how to get ahead. But he had such respect for his father that he listened eagerly to anything the patriarch said. In the course of time the talks turned more and more to race and the race hate that was

being stirred by political campaigns and by the new yellow journals that were springing up in Atlanta.

The parents had kept their children as much as possible from clash with the color bars that ran through all of Atlanta life. While friendly, they kept aloof from the white neighbors to the west. They made their life with the colored and, so far as the parents could manage it, only with the respectable and hard-working families. The children walked to school and on errands, no matter how far, to avoid the shame of Jim Crow on the streetcars. Even when the young people went to preparatory school and college, they walked the three miles across town to the Atlanta University campus and thus saved both face and money.

In order that the mother and her family could make trips without using the hated Jim Crow cars, the father bought a surrey.

"This was the most magnificent equipage in the world then or now," Walter says, "with its magnificent mudguards of shining patent leather, its gracefully curving top hung about with long fringe, its shining nickel hubs, its ceremonial whip, never used, but standing erect in its shining socket and flying in the wind like a royal banner."

Once Walter, coming with the quiet of bare feet, surprised his father in the stable, his eyes shining as he stood rubbing the rich, thick leather of the surrey, much as a Chinese gentleman might delight to fondle smooth and precious jade. Seeing the boy, the father turned away and said gruffly, "This leather is very dusty. You must be more careful to keep it clean."

The family had to be careful in everything. One hundred dollars a month, or even the \$125 which his father received at the peak of his career, while far above the income of most colored men of the time, was small enough for a family of seven children. Walter wonders to this day how his parents

did so much on so little. They paid slowly but regularly until they gained full ownership of house and barn and yard, which were kept at a neatness far above the standards of the white families on their street. The children were clothed not fashionably, but more than decently. "Rags are a disgrace," his mother used to say, "but patches are an honor." They ate plain foods but plenty. And all of the seven children were sent through school and college.

The home cooking is one of the things Walter remembers best, for he has always been a lover of good food. He smells to this day the glad aroma of the Saturday baking of biscuits and light bread. He remembers the specialties that his mother used to have for the various days of the week. On Mondays, 15 cents worth of the coarsest round steak mixed with lots of onions and gravy, and doused over heaping plates of hominy grits; Wednesdays a 5-cent soup bone, cooked in a great vat of home-grown vegetables; on week ends a fowl boiled on Saturday and served cold on Sunday to avoid profane labor on the Lord's Day. Walter claims that no restaurant that he has since visited in Paris, New York, or Stockholm has ever equaled the delicacy of his mother's cooking.

All that this family hardly and thriftily won was always in danger from color prejudice. When Walter was thirteen years old it was threatened starkly by a storm of race hate that was whipped up in Atlanta.

The boy sensed only vaguely what was going on. He saw strange sights and heard snatches of queer talk. One night a hooded band rode by the house, and he heard people whispering, "Ku Klux Klan." Standing at the outskirts of a political meeting he was bewildered to hear orators cry: "The niggers are plotting to seize the Capitol. Do you want to see white civilization wiped out in a black orgy of jungle savagery? A vote for Blankety Blank is a vote for white supremacy." He heard his friends talking about a show called

*The Clansman* and about the angry crowds that streamed out of De Give's Grand Opera House where it was playing to packed houses every night. He heard newsboys screaming scareheads: "Two Assaults," "Negro Attacks Third Victim," "Brutal Attack on Gray-haired Woman," "Girls Threatened on Sugar Creek Bridge." He saw white hoodlums stride into Negro stores, snatch goods from counters and shelves and carry them off, daring the colored owners to stop them. Everywhere it seemed people were muttering "damn niggers."

The storm broke one evening in the fall of 1906 while father and son were collecting mail in their cart near the center of town. While they were driving along Peachtree Street, a roar burst out in near-by Pryor Street.

"It's come," the man said with a sadness that made the boy sad too, but with a resignation that made the boy angry, itching not to accept but to fight—an itch that has directed his life from that day forward.

As the mail cart drove along its route near the busy Five Points section, the boy and his father saw the riot strike. The mob in Pryor Street roared and searched for victims. It closed around a colored boy coming home from work and hacked him to death with jackknives. From Hernden's barber shop shuffled a colored bootblack with a withered leg. He was just the type the South loved best in its Negroes—crippled, servile, always grinning a "Yassuh, boss, yassuh." But nothing could save him as the howling mob shouted, "There's another; get the black bastard!" and the pack paused a moment while one white giant knocked the boy to the ground and put a long butcher knife through his gaunt body.

Through the tumult and bloodshed of this first Saturday of the Atlanta riot the postman stolidly drove his mail route. When Walter asked him, years later, why he hadn't turned

back when the rioting started, his father answered, "Son, you know I couldn't have done that. I was still on duty."

The next day, Sunday, there was a sullen lull until night fell. The father kept to his mail route but fortunately Sunday duty was only for three afternoon hours. A few of the faithful had gathered solemnly at the morning services of the little colored churches. But with no need for announcement, the evening meetings were dropped, and all Negroes stayed closely in their homes all over the city.

As darkness fell a group of friends rushed to warn the Whites that a mob was coming down Houston Street to clean up "dark town" a few blocks below their house and to hunt out and burn every Negro home in the neighborhood. These friends offered pistols which the father refused until his wife spoke to him sharply.

"Mr. White," she said—in all their lives the children never heard her address him by any other name, though she could put into the formal title tender love and adoration, as well as wifely impatience. "Mr. White," she said, "take those guns. These crackers have gone crazy. No telling what they'll do. But they won't do it to us without getting a lesson."

As the Sabbath evening wore on, the growl of the mob began to roll louder and louder, the burning torches making a witch's dance, nearer and nearer. The family, pistols cocked, took their stand behind the shuttered windows. For a moment it seemed that the mob would pass the modest home set discreetly back from the street and bordering right on a block of houses owned by white folks. But suddenly a man shouted, "Here's where that nigger mailman lives. It's too damn good for a nigger. Burn the house down!"

Standing in the front upstairs window, the father said to Walter, "Son, don't shoot until the first man steps on the lawn. And then *don't miss!*"

Suddenly—miraculously it seemed—the mob was scat-

tered. A volley spat into the crowd from the upper windows of MacDougald's Drug Store, a few doors away. A second volley—and panic seized the mob. Dropping their bravado, the crowd ran in wild disorder.

Next night the riot shifted from the slums and saloons that infested Decatur and Peter Streets to Brownsville where the rolling campuses of Clark University and Gammon Theological Seminary gave beauty and spaciousness that angry orators dubbed "a damned bad settin' for nigger larnin'." The Gammon Seminary was headed by John W. E. Bowen, jovial, black, and stately. He and his plump brown wife were the best friends of the Whites in all Atlanta. By the grapevine telegraph that works so swiftly among all persecuted minorities, Doctor Bowen learned that the mob was shifting its attack and foolishly telephoned the city police for protection. The police dashed into the house of this "blabbing nigger" and beat the godly man almost to death.

After three or four days, the riot sputtered out. No one to this day knows the total, both white and colored, who were killed, nor the much greater number who were maimed, nor the loss in property by burning, stoning, and looting. Not only toughs and ruffians were killed, but at least half a dozen of Atlanta's most substantial and law-abiding colored citizens. According to a careful study made by the Atlanta Chamber of Commerce, not a single Negro, against whom fantastic charges had been hurled, was found guilty.

This riot had a deep influence on Walter White. But a healthy thirteen-year-old boy has lots of bounce. And there were hundreds of interests that seemed as vital at the time as mobs and injustice.

He entered the preparatory school of Atlanta University and was thrown into the exciting world of students from all over the country, of boys that he liked to play with, of

girls that had a strange fascination for this popular adolescent. While the students were all Negroes, as required by the segregation laws, the teachers at Atlanta, as at most of the early Negro colleges, were largely white. Walter prizes most, among the campus influences, the high standards of the galaxy of New England scholars and the rich, generous personalities that he found behind their stern manners.

"The reason I did not learn to hate all white people," he says, "is that I kept meeting so many fine white folks to balance the mean ones."

With a fair-to-average amount of study and much baseball, singing, debating, pranking—all the delights of college life—he went through the four years of preparatory school and four years of college of Atlanta University. He thought of going into business or law. But he didn't worry about the future. He knew he would be a success. Meanwhile he was busily having a good time and busily working to keep himself going.

The first time he ever got regular wages was as delivery boy for I. Kalish, the tailor. He worked six days a week one summer from seven in the morning to seven at night for 50 cents a week, later raised "in recognition of faithful service" to 75 cents. In spite of the small pay, this seemed to Walter better than the endless chores and errands at home. And it gave him a feeling of being a man of the world. Next summer he did much better, serving as office boy to a popular physician at the fine salary of \$2.50 a week—which was suddenly raised to \$3 after he had stumbled onto the doctor giving one of his fashionable lady patients a too intimate "treatment."

Other summers he served as bellhop in the swank downtown hotels, and had to learn agile dodges to avoid the attentions of white women both among the patrons and the help. He was amazed and frightened by these episodes. If

he repulsed the women too brusquely, he was afraid they would take revenge by shouting false charges against him, as Potiphar's wife did against Joseph when he repulsed her in the land of Egypt. No Negro could openly repulse or openly report an advance by a member of the South's "pure white womanhood" without inviting a lynching.

After college he entered the Atlanta office of the Standard Life Insurance Company and began to make good money. He would, if he could, have gone on in the career of the popular, successful go-getter of the age. But he kept hitting bumps that jolted his ease and stirred his conscience. And deep inside him was the boyhood wound of the Atlanta riot.

One day, walking along a fashionable Atlanta Street, he passed a church with a large sign, "Hearty Welcome to All." He was fascinated; maybe one Christian church was willing to practice Christian brotherhood. He hunted up the minister and asked if he could join the church. The preacher, thrown off guard by his light skin and blond hair, was delighted. "Are you a Christian, brother? Do you believe in the teachings of Jesus Christ?" Walter said he did but asked if the minister was sure he believed in Jesus' teachings of brotherhood and the Golden Rule. Certainly, the minister was sure. Then Walter told him he was a Negro. And that ended all talk of brotherhood.

In a wave of economy that often strikes politicians, Atlanta suddenly proposed to cut still further the pittance given to colored schools by stopping public education for Negroes with the sixth grade. "Too much schoolin' is bad for niggers," the politicians argued, "anyway they don't pay taxes to speak of, so why should white folks go broke teachin' niggers who can't learn nohow."

The Negroes at once organized a drive to keep what schools they had. John Hope, then president of Morehouse



College, led the movement, and Walter White threw himself into the campaign with a fervor he could never work up for insurance. This battle showed in itself all the principles that he has been fighting for and many of the injustices he has been fighting against ever since. He shaped his own thinking as he helped the committee prepare the case it presented to the school board:

Negroes do pay taxes—on more than one and a half million dollars' worth of property in Atlanta—and their labor helps create much of the wealth which others "own."

Regardless of taxes, the American principle of public education is equal opportunity for all children, rich and poor alike.

The security and growth of any community—Atlanta or any other—depends on the decency and competence of all its citizens, including that large group who happen to have brown skins.

Walter gained confidence from this battle, for the Negroes won the fight to keep their schools. And a little later when a bond issue was presented, a renewal of the campaign defeated the issue until its sponsors wrote into it an agreement to use part of the funds for building Negro schools.

In the course of this struggle, officers of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People came to Atlanta and helped greatly in winning the battle. Walter White met James Weldon Johnson, the poet-statesman who was then executive secretary of the Association, and W. E. B. Du Bois, who was editor of the Association's magazine, *Crisis*. He admired these men and he saw the value of their national agency in giving leadership to local efforts. A branch of the N.A.A.C.P. was formed in Atlanta with White as one of its active members, and he was at least on

the fringes of the movement to which he was to devote his life.

Ironically, it was Walter White's pale skin that got him his first job in the Negro movement. The N.A.A.C.P. wanted an investigator who looked white enough to mingle with crowds and gather evidence from white people about lynchings. Walter was offered this hazardous job along with a post as junior officer and man of all work in the headquarters of the Association in New York.

His mother was shocked at the thought of her boy in the midst of sinful Harlem. But his father gave him the advice which Walter has always regarded as the charter of his career. The old man said solemnly, "Your mother and I have given you the best we could in home training and education. It is now your duty to use that to help others who haven't had your advantages. Unless folks like you do what you can, the Negro is going to sink farther and farther down. Folks will misunderstand your motives. Often you'll be criticized and abused. But decide what is right and then don't let anything or anybody keep you from doing it."

In 1918 Walter White took the post and moved to New York. He was as thrilled by the big, raucous, gay city as by the beginning of a career into which he could throw his whole soul. He took rooms in Harlem and plunged into the life that was bubbling there with the beginnings of the "Negro Renaissance." He sat in the downtown office of the N.A.A.C.P. on lower Fifth Avenue, so thrilled by the New York spectacle that he spent more time gazing out the windows than he did at his desk. But the work in the field was stark enough to keep him from any danger of being swallowed up in New York gaiety.

On his first trip South, he wormed out of the white villagers, who were eager to gloat over the recent "nigger bee,"

one of the most brutal crimes ever uncovered in America—or in Nazi Germany. A white man had been shot by a Negro in a quarrel over a crop settlement. Everyone agreed the white man was mean, dishonest, hated by white and black alike, “but we gotta show niggers they can’t touch a white man, no matter how low-down he is.” So a lynching mob started which did not stop until it had strung up not only the original culprit but nine other Negroes “who was uppity or talked back or needed a dressin’ down anyway.”

The mob ended by seizing a black woman far advanced with child, who, in protecting two victims hidden on her place, had shot into the mob as it stormed her cabin. Frenzied with anger and lust, the mob seized her, strung her by her feet to a tree, ripped the baby from her body, and burned child and mother in a great bonfire to white supremacy.

One cracker, in telling the story to White, slapped his thigh and gurgled: “It was the best show, Mister, I ever did see. You ought to have heard the wench howl when we strung her up.”

In another state where a man had been murdered, culprits had to be found quickly since the woman who had done the murder was a special friend of the political boss of the county. Three Negroes, two men and a woman, were at once accused and arrested. But the trial lagged, so a mob stormed the jail, took all three victims to the edge of a cornfield and told them to run—while the mob riddled them with bullets. The men fell quickly, but in babbling out the tale to Walter White one of the mobsters complained, “We had to waste nigh onto fifty bullets before we could down the wench and stop her kickin’.”

Walter had some narrow escapes as he searched out criminals in the hate-charged countrysides. Once, while looking into a riot in Arkansas, he barely escaped a mob that had learned he was a Negro. Breathlessly he boarded a

train only to have the conductor say: "Mister, you're leavin' town just as the fun is about to start. They're after a yaller nigger down here passin' for white."

This question of "passing" is a moot point with Walter. Some Negroes think he makes too much of his whiteness. Actually he does not know the percentage of his black ancestry, and he doesn't care. He has thrown in his lot with Negroes and his only interest in "blood" is the confusion of those who try to classify him and hundreds of thousands of other Americans. He recalls the debate in one state when "one drop of African blood" was proposed as a standard, and an alarmed legislator arose and cried: "Gentlemen, if you try to pass that law, you will bathe the state in blood, and there won't be enough white men left to pass it."

Probing into lynchings, defending civil rights, working in myriad ways for Negro progress, Walter White has devoted his whole career to the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. When James Weldon Johnson, who for fifteen years had been the wise director of the Association, moved in 1931 to Fisk University, Walter was appointed to his post of executive secretary. And when W. E. B. Du Bois, the Association's director of publications, moved to Atlanta University in 1936, Walter was left as the single great force in the organization's work.

Some critics claim that the N.A.A.C.P. is not the power it used to be under the solid leadership of Johnson and Du Bois and under the advisory direction of such active trustees as Arthur and Joel Spingarn, Morefield Storey, and a host of militant friends. Some say the Association is now too much a one-man show, and even hint that Walter sometimes confuses his own career with the Association's crusade.

"He is too ready," one friend says, "to take up any cause that offers publicity; he uses the Association as a sound truck

to blare out his fame; he loves to call big people by their first names and to be thought of as an intimate friend of the great."

Whatever the gibes, no one claims that the fight for justice and civil rights has slackened either in fury or in success. In place of the older white friends, the Association has rallied many of the most effective younger Negroes. Charles Houston, Judge William H. Hastie, Daisy Lampkin, and Thurgood Marshall are examples of those who are actively serving as directors or special workers. And there can be no question of White's wholehearted devotion to the work, for he has refused many offers of high prestige and high salary in order to stick by the hard and homely battles in which this Association is the national leader.

He makes no pretense that his interest in democracy is objective and dispassionate. The hurts of a lifetime are whips to his zeal. A family tragedy sealed his passion against the injustice of color caste. His father fell suddenly ill and was rushed to the great city hospital of Atlanta for an emergency operation. But on learning of his race, the surgeons balked. After long palaver, they shipped him in the rain to the colored ward across the way.

In speaking of it, Walter's face grows tense and haggard as he says, "In the course of this rigmarole of keeping the white wards pure and keeping the Negro in his place, my father died in agony."

The work of the N.A.A.C.P. has been stern, unrelenting, and steadily successful. Its chief fight for decades was to curb the terrible curse of lynching. Of course many other agencies helped in this fight, especially the Southern Commission on Interracial Cooperation. But the spearhead of the battle was the National Association, and the special crusader has been Walter White. In court battles, in organizing committees throughout the country, in newspaper reports

and magazine articles, and in his powerful book, *Rope and Faggot*, he has led the fight against lynching for a quarter of a century. He reports proudly that these crimes, which averaged two hundred a year at the close of the last century and over one hundred a year well into the twentieth century, have been reduced to a mere trickle: only four lynchings in the whole nation in 1941, five in 1942.

A large part of the triumph, Walter thinks, has come through exposing, widely and pitilessly, the excesses of the mobs and the false accusations against the victims.

"Careful studies have shown," he points out, "that while attacks on white women are the stock excuse for lynching, in reality out of 2522 Negroes lynched during a twenty-year period, only 477 or 19 per cent were even charged with any sex offense."

He reports that hundreds of Negroes are done to death for the most trivial offenses: talking back to a white man, testifying against whites, allowing a dog to chase a white man's sheep, attempting to force an honest settlement from a landlord for a colored sharecropper. Baker was killed in South Carolina for accepting the office of postmaster, and Collins for enticing a white man's servant to leave. Dozens of lynchings have followed resistance to white men's attacks on colored women.

The evil influence on the white community has also been clearly proved: whole regions riddled by hysteria; the church helpless before these attacks on its central teachings of brotherhood and love; lowered respect for any law and decency; children learning violence and perversion by watching obscene tortures and gruesome murders.

Since local courts have refused to bring the mobs to justice, White has urged a federal law to make lynching a national crime. While southern Congressmen have held off this legislation by filibusters and every kind of obstruction,

he is confident that they cannot much longer resist the demands of an aroused nation. Meanwhile the debates have stirred the whole country. The public education that has come with the agitation may be as valuable as the law itself.

Lynchings are not the only interest of Walter White and the N.A.A.C.P. They are devoted to protecting all of the rights of the colored minority. They have attacked one device after another to cheat the Negroes of their votes and have recently struck for the rights of the poor voter, white or black, by sponsoring bills in Congress to do away with the poll tax. They have fought city ordinances and private covenants that seek to confine Negroes in black ghettos. They have brought case after case to the United States Supreme Court demanding equal schools, equal salaries for teachers, equal opportunities in every walk of life. And the Supreme Court has stood solidly and squarely for social justice and civil rights. Unfortunately, actual practice in such matters is not so much a question of national policy as of local prejudice. So White and his associates are constantly fighting their battles on all fronts: in the federal courts, in the newspapers, with the local authorities, and in the consciences of the people.

In this fight Walter White has been as active as a wasp. He has gathered evidence by mingling with mobs and talking to witnesses in forty-one lynchings and eight race riots. He travels like a busy shuttlecock from one end of the country to the other—an estimated half million miles during the past twenty-five years. He is constantly meeting with committees, plotting with lawyers, lobbying in the capitals of the nation and the several states, flying from Pennsylvania to California, from Chicago to Galveston and Miami.

In such a career, there is no such thing as a typical day's work. When he is in New York he usually rises at seven,

reads three or four newspapers during breakfast, and before he leaves home studies memos on current work and makes notes of the "musts" for that day. Arriving about 9:30 at his office on the top floors of the old building at 69 Fifth Avenue, he is met by a crowd of callers already waiting in the lobby, by the office manager with a list of questions from staff and committees and notes of things he *must* do *at once*, and by his secretary with a stack of mail which he and she plunge into until the clamor of other tasks ends their unequal struggle.

He says that the director of an association for human rights should be open to every human claim. So he will not refuse to see any applicant or have any telephone call turned away. The result is tumult in his office and on his desk. But he seems to work best in tumult. He turns to answer the telephone a dozen times during any conference. He rushes out to speak to callers and refers as many as he can to others in the office—but only after at least a handshake from him. He is putting through calls to Washington and Chicago and Los Angeles while he dictates letters or presides over a committee. And he can keep all these things going at once, making each feed the other, interlarding his talks to a Washington official with a story just told by a caller, answering an office conference question by a statement that has just come to him over the telephone, often even getting a caller to dictate part of a letter or a memorandum that he is dashing off between talk and telephone. When traveling, as he is more than half the time, he works in the same feverish fashion, using his hotel room or any office he can capture to see dozens of individual callers, meet with committees, telephone, dictate, talk, buzz, buzz, buzz.

One of Walter White's most spectacular battles came just as he took over the leadership of the N.A.A.C.P. When in 1930 President Hoover nominated Judge John J. Parker



to the United States Supreme Court, the Association denounced his appointment as reactionary and set out to prevent its confirmation by the Senate. White appeared before the Senate Committee with a scathing attack on "this North Carolina Judge, who has flaunted the rights of organized labor and of the Negro, who has advocated over and over again means to disfranchise Negroes which in eight separate cases have been declared unconstitutional by the very Supreme Court to which he is now nominated." This fight was one of the first to unite the rights of Negroes and of Labor, thus merging the Negro in the struggle of the common man.

When the Administration tried to force the appointment through, the Association fought every issue step by step. When the quotations attributed to Judge Parker were declared to be false, Walter White sent to every Senator a photostatic copy of an address in which Parker advocated the notorious "grandfather clause"—the device denying the vote to those whose grandfathers were not citizens, thus excluding Negroes whose ancestors were slaves. In reply to the claim of Senator Overman of North Carolina that Negroes themselves had supported Parker for Governor in 1920, White published telegrams of denial from hundreds of the most influential Negroes of North Carolina. A "Negro leader" who publicly supported Parker's nomination was proved by White to be at that moment under federal indictment in Winston-Salem. When Senator Fess of Ohio charged that the opposition arose from Communism, White rested his case squarely on the United States Constitution and the historic decisions of the United States Supreme Court.

Mass meetings of thousands of liberals, colored and white, were organized throughout the country by scores of local branches of the N.A.A.C.P., with speeches, statements to the press, telegrams to Washington. The churches were

aroused to oppose the nomination on the grounds of brotherhood and the Golden Rule. Newspapers swung into line, especially the then-powerful Scripps-Howard chain. With the decision of the Senate hanging on a few votes, and the issue delayed from day to day, White hounded every liberal Senator to stick in Washington until the question was decided. At the last minute, he got Thomas D. Scholl to rush from his home in Minnesota and cast one of the votes by which the nomination was rejected 41 to 39.

White jumps so avidly at every Negro issue that he sometimes seems a fanatic rather than a statesman. And he stands so flatly for total democracy that he seems to oppose steps *toward* democracy that might be more effective than revolutionary change. In several states and cities, suits brought by the N.A.A.C.P. to force equal salaries for colored and white teachers have brought huge concessions. But White has opposed all concessions. Insisting on complete equality, he will not compromise even for a partial victory.

Although the United States Army at first provided no facilities for the training of Negro pilots, White objected when private interests made possible a flying school at Tuskegee Institute on the grounds that this was cementing the pattern of segregation. He was equally opposed to the acceptance by Tuskegee of an annual grant of a hundred thousand dollars from the State of Alabama because, with the state naming six of the school's twenty-five trustees, he felt the independence of this historic institution would be jeopardized. Whereupon a Negro paper, the *Nashville Globe and Independent*, said:

Rank and file members of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People should start a rebellion in their local branches against the regime of Walter White, the executive secretary. They might get this choleric little man to change his ways or force him to resign. . . . The ven-

detta he is now carrying on against Tuskegee Flying School is undoubtedly injurious to the morale of the young men being trained there. His opposition to Tuskegee getting funds from the state of Alabama could be suppressed until it is shown that state aid for the great school proved injurious to it. . . . But Walter White specializes in agitation, and still worse in fury too vindictive to accomplish any worthwhile results for the race he is trying to serve.

In general, however, the Negro press has staunchly supported White and the N.A.A.C.P. And it is certainly true that many victories would not have been won by anything but a flat stand. Walter White and attorneys for the National Association forced the University of Maryland to open its doors to Negroes in all departments for which the state did not make adequate provision in a Negro college. In the famous Gaines case in Missouri, the Supreme Court handed down the decision that states must make provision for the highest realms of education for Negroes or else admit qualified colored students to the "white" state universities. More than all other agencies put together, the National Association has forced Negro salaries upward in the segregated school systems of the South.

But Walter White's life is not all work and battle. Through the busy years there have been warm friendships and the delights of social life in Harlem, in the drawing rooms of Park Avenue, in cities and towns all over the country. He plays almost as hard as he works. And he never tries to keep the two apart. Friends met at parties are at once drafted into his crusades. Fellow-workers and sometimes even enemies mingle chatter and sociability with the battles.

After he had been in the New York office of the N.A.A.C.P. for three or four years, he noticed a new secretary. He always insisted on well-dressed and pretty clerks, but this

was something special. He asked her if he might call one night, and there followed a gala courtship with dinners and theaters and night clubs—all the things Walter loved to do, and found he loved even more to do with Gladys Powell. They were married in 1922.

She was darker than he, the beautiful daughter of a tall brown troubadour—one of the early popular Negro baritone—and a mother who was part white, part Indian. They made a striking couple: he, fair and handsome; she, olive brown, with lustrous long black hair and a regal carriage. When in their gay courtship and early married life they walked together into restaurants people stared, partly just at the handsome couple, partly in whispering question of this striking octoroon shamelessly flaunting a white lover. Sometimes, to confuse things still further, they spoke to each other in French. Then suspicion quickly turned to adulation, "Ah, nobility from the French colonies perhaps? Ah, how may we serve Madame et Monsieur!"

With his charming wife he has lived for many years in one of the big apartment houses on Sugar Hill, a fashionable section at the edge of Harlem. A daughter, Jane, at twenty-one is a senior at Smith College. Popular throughout her college career, she has been elected President of the House of Representatives, one of the three most coveted student honors. A son, Walter, has just been graduated from the Fieldston School. At sixteen his five feet nine inches of lithe brawn towers over his father's slight five feet seven.

In 1923 Walter White paused from his busy crusading to spend a quiet summer at Mary Ovington's country place in the Berkshires and to write his first novel, *Fire in the Flint*, the tragic story of an educated Negro doctor trying to stem the tide of superstition and prejudice among his own people as well as among the whites of southern Georgia. In 1927 he spent a year in southern France on a Guggenheim fellow-

ship, where he wrote his stirring compendium on lynchings and much of a later novel entitled *Flight*. He has served on many missions, at home and abroad, having to do with scholarship and current affairs as well as social justice. He is a popular and prolific writer of essays, stories, and exhortations in American magazines. Among his public honors are the Spingarn medal for interracial activities and a Doctor of Laws degree from Howard University.

His fastidious tastes bring a good deal of joking. In rushes of late night work when food has to be brought in to keep the office going, his friends, after ordering sandwiches and black coffee for themselves, turn to Walter and say, "Now can we get you some humming birds' wings?" His love of delicacies led him to get together a cook book which not only gives recipes for many rare and toothsome dishes, but traces the people and the crops and customs from which the dishes came. He is a crank about his clothes and linen. Even when he was a boy his shirts had to be ironed a special way. His mother used to call him Mr. Astor and wonder where he got his fancy tastes.

He is so fitted to the fast, brilliant pace of New York life that no one can believe he was reared in the South. He is quick, alert, nervous. He loves to drive an automobile as fast as the traffic will bear. He travels by air whenever possible. In spite of a lifetime of warfare against the ugliest forms of prejudice and crime, he is gay, witty, debonair. He enjoys the theater and movies, baseball and prize fights. He loves parties, meeting new people, eating, drinking, dancing. In any gathering he quickly finds the most attractive beauty—unless there is some distinguished male guest to distract his attention. He likes stories, especially those with an ironic thrust. His wife quotes as his idea of humor the story of a pompous southern gentleman visiting a night club in Hollywood. On seeing Hazel Scott and a dark escort enter, the

proud gentleman exclaimed, "Do you allow Negroes here?" And the doorman blandly answered, "Yes, sir. Come right in."

He reads everything: books, magazines, newspapers. He has an excellent library in his home, including a prize collection on Negroes and other colored races. He thinks he cannot go to sleep without reading for an hour in bed. His wife and friends say this makes life difficult in an apartment or when he is visiting in crowded homes. He carries around pockets full of newspaper clippings which he pulls out and begins discussing with everyone he meets.

Most of all he loves people. He lives and thrives in the midst of people. And his legions of acquaintances quickly become such easy friends that all—Supreme Court judges, bootblacks, Wendell Willkie, Joe Louis, Walter Wanger—at once begin exchanging first names as a matter of course.

Walter White has fought so valiantly all his life that he is in his own person a terrible army. But he is an army with banners—gay, dancing pennants as well as martial flags. The first impression one gets on meeting him is of a widely traveled, well-read, busy man of the world. But his record in action shows a keen, tough warrior, probably the strongest and most successful champion of civil rights in America today.



# SWEET POTATO WIZARD





PEOPLE'S VOICE

GEORGE WASHINGTON CARVER

# SWEET POTATO WIZARD

**A**N OLD man, stooped and gray with years, wandered every morning through the woods of his beloved Alabama. He looked like a trusted servant bowed with long devotion, this frail, aging Negro in a shabby alpaca coat. And he liked to think of himself as a servant—a steward in the service of his God and of his race and of the South.

Visitors to Tuskegee Institute these days see a wide campus, many strong brick buildings, an able colored faculty, fourteen hundred young Negroes learning to farm, to teach, to gain skill in trades, to become competent citizens of the modern world. They might have seen also—up to a few days before his death on January 5, 1943—this aged professor who for half a century had been one of the geniuses of this institution.

George Washington Carver has become a legend at Tuskegee and throughout America. His work with two neglected crops has been so glorified that he became known as the wizard of sweet potatoes and peanuts. He not only spread these crops throughout the South, but found hundreds of fresh uses for them. And he found use for many of the great wastes of the region: cotton stalks and wood shavings into plastics, pine trees into paper, leaves into fertilizer, clays into pigments and paints.

Keen in his insights, ingenious in his discoveries, he was a Burbank or an Edison rather than an exact, scientific scholar. He did not like to be called a scientist, but rather an old-

fashioned naturalist—a loving student of nature and of nature's God.

Whatever the final appraisal of his work, George Washington Carver is already an American myth. The story of his life is so fantastic that it could have happened only in this new world where miracles are a part of the common annals. Daniel Boone, Andrew Jackson, or Andrew Carnegie did not fight against greater odds to higher glory than this frail Negro.

Born a slave in the early sixties, nobody knows just when, the boy never knew his father or mother, who were bound to separate plantations in the southwest corner of Missouri. He did not so much as own a name. Before he was six months old, night raiders swooped down and carried him off with his mother and a group of other slaves. The raiders in their flight paid little heed to the child. He went unfed, caught whooping cough, and was dying when agents from the owners came to buy back the black cargo. The mother had already been sold and shipped away, no one ever knew where. And the baby was traded back to his former master, Moses Carver, in exchange for an old horse.

The sickly boy was reared by the Carvers, and from them he took his name. "George Washington" was added in praise of his honesty and industry. When slavery was officially ended this boy, like many others, kept right on in his former master's home. Too small and frail to do heavy field work, he was used for little tasks about the house: getting in the wood, tending the fires, helping Mrs. Carver with the meals and the cleaning and even with her sewing.

The Carver farm of eighty years ago was self-sufficient. Not only food but almost all needs and comforts were supplied at home. When someone was sick, the family did their own nursing and even made up their own medicines. It was George's job to peel the bark from the north side of the tree

to be brewed into a purge for man or beast. He gathered sassafras bark and spice bushes to put in the lard and make it sweet. He carefully stored ashes from the many fireplaces so that at hog-killing time they could be mixed with fat to make stacks and stacks of soap.

His nimble fingers helped the womenfolk spin home-grown flax and hemp and wool to make dresses for the children, heavy work clothes for the men, long billowy skirts for the ladies. He helped the men tan the hides of cattle and deer and make them into shoes and leather britches. To dye the clothing he gathered oak bark for black, hickory for yellow, chestnut for brown.

Whenever he could get away from his chores, he loved to go off into the woods alone. There he made friends with the flowers and birds and little animals. Finding new plants, he kept bringing them home and asking, "What is this? What can you make of that? Why does this plant bear its fruit in the air and that one in the ground? Why do trees have bark?" He didn't get many good answers to his questions. But, close to the earth he loved, he began his career of searching out nature's secrets.

He wanted other learning too. He wanted to read and write and figure. Finding an old blue-backed speller, he pored over it until he knew every word. The Carvers were interested and a little amused at their black boy's zeal. So, with slavery over, they let him go off, when he was about ten, to find some schooling in a near-by village. Tramping eight miles over the hills, he landed in the county seat, Neosho, not knowing a soul and not having a penny in his faded jeans. He crawled into an old horse barn to sleep, picked up odd jobs about the village for food, and finally entered school—seventy-five black children in an old log cabin, sitting stiffly on rows of old log benches, droning out their letters to an old log of a teacher.

One fine thing happened to him in Neosho. Mariah Watkins, a great dark Mother-of-the-Gracchi kind of woman, found him one morning sitting on her wood pile, picking seeds from a sunflower. She saw his shyness and his hunger. At once—and for a whole beautiful year—she took him in and filled his belly and his heart.

There was no nonsense about Mariah Watkins. She saw to it that the boy earned his keep by splitting wood and milking cows, by building fires and cleaning house and barn. She kept him scrubbed and neat, and she saw to it that after family prayers in the evening he worked on his lessons as hard as on his chores.

And she noticed his hands: long-fingered, agile, graceful hands. Soon he was using those hands—as he had begun to, at the Carver ranch—for the delicate tasks of cooking food and ironing clothes, even sewing and crocheting. The boy never seemed to mind woman's work. Aunt Mariah used to say she would rather have "my George" help her around the house than any girl. His eager fingers soon began to draw pictures on his slate, make little figures out of clay. He was not ashamed to cut out paper dolls—whenever he could get any paper—etching out the figures with his pocket knife and painting them with the juice he squeezed out of the many colored clays.

Aunt Mariah gave mothering to the shy, frail, black boy—the love and loving discipline that he got so little of during the other years of his early life. And she taught him reverence. He already knew and loved nature. She taught him to love God and goodness. She gave him a Bible that he was still reading seventy years later, two days before he died, still keeping the place with the bookmark he had embroidered under her watchful eye.

Within a year he had learned all the little Neosho school could teach him. And he kept saying, "I want to learn. I

want to know." So Aunt Mariah, as ambitious for this "strange skinny question mark of a boy" as he was for himself, helped him one day to climb onto a mule-drawn covered wagon on its way to Kansas.

Landed in Fort Scott he walked up to the finest house in sight—owned by the rich Paynes—and applied for the job of cook. The lady of the house looked doubtfully at the dark twelve-year-old. But she needed help. "You better be good," she scolded. "My husband likes everything just so. If you can't roast meat and make good coffee, out you go."

George had learned a little guile, as well as godliness, from Aunt Mariah. He said, "I want to cook everything just as you and Mr. Payne are used to. If you'll show me what you do with each dish, then I'll be sure to get it your way."

Flattered, Mrs. Payne spent hours in the kitchen with him. So he learned to cook "just right" dishes he had never heard of before. He took prizes at the village fair for his light rolls and salt-rising bread, for his yeast and buttermilk biscuits, and for his puddings.

But another kind of schooling met him in this border town. He began to learn what it is to be a "nigger." On the Carver farm he had been part of a huge patriarchal household. White and colored worked together, and caste meant little to a busy chore boy. In Neosho he had been so happy with his colored foster mother and had studied so hard in the poor little colored school that the white world hardly existed for him. But here life was seething. Kansas was on the make. True, it had been famous as a "free state" before the Civil War. But with settlers piling in by wagon loads, with free lands to be seized and tilled, with pioneering fortunes to be made, the struggle to get ahead was keen and crude. And the easiest way to climb seemed to be "to trample on the colored scum: Indians and niggers."

George found they didn't want black boys in the schools.

They didn't want black boys playing with their children or working about their farms or towns. They didn't want black boys.

One evening, on an errand to the drugstore, he ran onto stark terror. A mob was milling around the village courthouse. As darkness fell, men stormed the jail, dragged out a helpless Negro, beat him to death (while women and children fought to snatch bits of his clothes or flesh as souvenirs). Then they burned the body in a great bonfire in the town square. The stench of burning flesh filled Carver's nostrils and seeped into his soul. He left the town that night.

For the next decade he was a lone wanderer. He went from town to town, sweeping yards, sawing wood, harvesting wheat and oats. His skillful hands often found strange jobs—as cook and seamstress, sometimes as gardener or keeper of a greenhouse. He snatched at learning where he could, sometimes in regular public schools, sometimes in little shacks set aside “for colored.”

His mind kept wanting to learn, to know. But his heart was bowed down by the color bars and sick from the memory of the lynching. He felt there was no place in America “for colored,” that there was no sense in his trying to climb. “But I didn't really believe it even then,” he used to say. “I knew I could do things just as well as any boy—better.”

One day after years of wandering and working and studying where he could, he sent a record of his schooling to a little Presbyterian college that boastfully called itself Highland University. A letter came back urging him to come right on and enter. He was thrilled. Here at last was a chance to prepare himself for a man's place in the world. He sold his few belongings and proudly set off for the town of Highland, Kansas.

On opening day he walked into the front office of the col-

lege. The principal, Duncan Brown, D.D., looked up sharply from his desk.

"Well, what do you want?"

"I am George Carver, sir, I have come to enter college."

"We don't take niggers here."

Again he started his wanderings. He took out a homestead claim on newly opened government land—and lost it through debt and taxes. He worked as chore boy and cook and laundry man. "I have washed clothes in pretty near every town in Kansas," he boasted.

One day, riding horseback over the endless sands of the prairie, he saw in the dim distance a great lake and a ship sailing on it. This mirage seemed the final blow: seeing something beautiful that you could never reach, that didn't even exist!

In 1890, when he must have been well past twenty-five years old, he finally found a school that would admit him: Simpson College in Indianola, Iowa. He landed with as strange a kit as a freshman ever had. A teacher has reported, "He came with a satchel full of poverty, a gangling six-foot body, a squeaky falsetto voice, a humble heart and a burning zeal to know everything." The courses he took that first year were as strange as his baggage: arithmetic, grammar, essays, etymology, and art.

His art teacher helped him most. She not only taught him about lines and color; she treated him like a human being. Seeing that his great talent was with plants, she wrote about him to her father, J. L. Budd, who was professor of horticulture at the Iowa Agricultural College. So it came about that in 1891 he was admitted to Iowa State College at Ames and began in earnest his scientific studies.

Here Carver flourished. The college was devoted to his favorite subject, farming. It had high standards and a fine



faculty. James G. Wilson and Henry Cantwell Wallace, both later Secretaries of Agriculture, were among his teachers, and Henry Agard Wallace, as a small boy, learned from him his first lessons in nature.

But color slapped at him even in Iowa. He was refused a room in the dormitory and bluntly turned out of the dining hall and sent to eat with the field hands in the basement. "This, too, I can bear—easy," he thought, for he was not going to let anything keep him from schooling. He got a job as janitor of North Hall and slept in one of its downstairs rooms. Since they would not admit him as a paying boarder, he turned evil to his own good, getting his meals free by serving as waiter in the dining hall. One girl stalked out when he served her food. But no one else seemed to mind. And slowly he made friends of most of those students who at first were shocked to find a "nigger" in their college. He opened a laundry and, by washing students' clothes, earned money for his simple needs. The only thing he would not accept was "any unearned reward." Many a well-meaning student and teacher got stern rebuffs when they tried to give him clothes or money or any sort of charity.

He studied hard, and his gift for understanding nature and making things grow soon placed him high on the honor roll. He kept on with his painting too, mingling more and more his love of nature and his love of art. Four of his paintings, all dealing with plants and flowers, won prizes at the Iowa Exhibit of State Artists and were sent on to the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago.

By graduation time, in 1894, he was at the top of his class. His graduation thesis was on "Plants as Modified by Man." And "because he knew everything and could express his knowledge with such beauty," his classmates chose him poet laureate. The class called itself "The Gourds" and had as its motto "Ever Climbing." So, on graduation day, George

Washington Carver read his class poem, "Ode to the Gourds." Two of his former teachers at Simpson College came over to share his glory and to eat graduation dinner with him at the high table of the very dining hall that at first had turned him away.

He stayed on for two more years at Ames, getting his M.A. and serving as graduate assistant. He was the first Negro to graduate from Iowa State College and the only Negro who has ever served on its teaching staff.

Calls began to come for him to teach at southern Negro schools. He was torn between his devotion to science, as carried on at this fine Iowa college, and his desire to serve his people. The faculty at Ames urged him not to leave and assured him of a teaching career there. Doctor Pammell reported, "I have great confidence in Mr. Carver's ability . . . and have had him reappointed at an increase in salary." Professor James G. Wilson wrote, in reply to a call from Alcorn College in Mississippi, "I do not want to lose Mr. Carver from our staff here. . . . In cross-fertilization and the propagation of plants he is by all means the ablest student we have. . . . I assure you I should not hesitate to have him teach our classes here. . . . With regard to plants he has a passion for them, in the conservatory, the garden, the orchard, and the farm. In that direction we have no one who is his equal. I had designed that he should experiment in developing our native plants, cross-fertilizing and introducing new plants from all over the world."

Finally a call came from Booker Washington for Carver to come and help him "develop sound farming among the Negroes of the South" at the booming new school at Tuskegee. This was a call Carver could not refuse. So in the fall of 1896 he went to the school in rural Alabama, where he stayed for the rest of his life.

Tuskegee was the place for Carver. It gave full scope to

his passion for plants and all growing things. It fitted his desire for service. It gave him a chance to build up the agriculture of a whole race and a whole region. Here for forty-six years he freely mingled the most practical farming with the keenest ingenuity in discovering new plants and new products.

As a part of their first lessons, his students cleaned out an old building for a laboratory, searched the alleys and trash piles for bottles, jars, bits of rubber and wire to make research equipment. For the study of agriculture he took his classes straight to the fields. He got nineteen acres of about the worst land in Alabama and with his students slowly nourished it back to fertility until it began to grow crops—and at a profit. Lectures and experiments in the laboratory were simply aids to test and to explain the real agriculture that the students were learning in the fields. He started with thirteen students and no regular course of study. He closed his first year with seventy-six students, three of them “ladies,” and with a formally outlined two-year course in agriculture based on the Iowa pattern.

The farmers round about Tuskegee jeered at this new-fangled farming. But little by little, year after year, they saw that Carver’s methods worked where theirs simply wasted the land and brought scant crops which they could neither eat nor sell. The old farmers weren’t converted, but there was a lot of talk around the stores and cabins about the book-farming of that professor at Tuskegee. Then the boll weevil struck.

Cotton was all the farmers in the black belt knew. It had been a poor bet at best. Profit came only in years of high markets. Yet the farmers staked everything on this one crop, neglecting to grow any food for themselves or feed for their mules. Where the farmers were sharecroppers, as most of the Negroes and poor whites were in the Deep South, the

owners were so jealous for their cash cotton that they forbade the croppers to "waste" even a garden plot on the raising of any kind of foodstuffs. When the weevil began swarming over the fields and eating up the cotton bolls, the whole structure of southern farming crashed.

Carver's knowledge now meant something to southern farmers, owners as well as tenants. He showed ways to fight the boll weevil pest. But most of all he crusaded for a new kind of farming: the raising of vegetables and fruits, of chickens and cattle and hogs. There was much opposition. The habits of a lifetime were not easily changed. The land-owners weren't interested in food; they wanted cash. And the farmers didn't know how to raise anything but cotton. Patiently, one by one, he demonstrated new crops that were simple enough for anybody to grow, rich enough for millions to use.

"Plant sweet potatoes and peanuts," he urged, and followed up his words by the deeds of his students and their demonstration farms. He raised eighty bushels of sweet potatoes on a single acre of sandy loam, and then raised a second crop on the same acre during the same year. He grew peanuts in equal abundance. The harvests were plentiful under Carver's skillful direction, and the land flourished.

But in the midst of this plenty, the farmers found a new cause to grumble. What were they going to do with all the peanuts and sweet potatoes? The crops were rotting and they were not making any money. Who wanted peanuts and sweet potatoes anyway? After you'd eaten your fill, what could you do with the rest?

Carver shut himself up in his laboratory and worked day and night. What *could* be done with them? He lived with peanuts and sweet potatoes until they gave up hundreds of their secrets. He distilled and siphoned and melted; he hung over test tubes until he piled up a mountain of uses for them.

From the peanut came milk, butter, cheese, candy, coffee, pickles, soap, oils, shaving lotions, wood stains, dyes, linoleum, flour, breakfast foods, sauces, face powder, shampoo, printer's ink, axle grease—a total of 300 products. From the sweet potato came flour, meal, starch, library paste, vinegar, shoe blacking, ginger, ink, rubber compound, molasses, wood filler—118 items. The farmers began to sell their crops and make money.

Carver became the public sponsor of these two crops. He wrote bulletins, made speeches, met with committees of farmers, pleaded, begged, and preached. And all the time he kept experimenting, searching out new uses for these simple staples. His magic—and even more the cash value of his crops and products—began to spread his fame throughout the South, throughout the nation.

When peanuts became so great an industry that American growers wanted them protected by a tariff, the Ways and Means Committee of Congress called a hearing, allotting ten minutes each to twelve southern spokesmen. Long before the end was in sight the Committee was sick and tired of the peanut. Then George Washington Carver, last on the list, walked up to a table on which stood his array of bottles and exhibits. Very simply, a smile on his kindly, wrinkled face, Doctor Carver told of his experiments, pointing to the bottles which held the hundred results of his fruitful years of study. The Congressmen sat forward in their seats and refused to let the old man stop. They wanted to know more about peanuts. And, his face glowing with zeal, Carver told them, talking for two solid hours to a room attentive and eager. The peanut was written into the tariff.

Yet honors for his science kept running into rebuffs for his color. All the years that he was doing so much to raise the farming of the South he was welcomed as a teacher but rejected as a man. The United Peanut Associations met in

Montgomery, Alabama, in 1920 and invited Professor Carver to be their scientific speaker. He arrived at the meeting place (the Exchange Hotel, the building from which a half century earlier the Confederate Congress had ordered the firing on Fort Sumter).

"What do you want?" the doorman shouted. "No niggers allowed."

When Carver explained that he had been invited to come and speak, he was sent around to the back door, lugging his bags of specimens, and hustled up the freight elevator to the assembly room. Without rancor he laid his samples out on the table and made his speech. He explained that pound for pound the peanut topped sirloin for proteins, the best potatoes for carbohydrates, and the best butter for fat. He showed how easily peanuts could be grown and how they enriched the soil. The meeting was deeply impressed, adopted resolutions of thanks to "the Professor from Tuskegee," and launched a great new industry for the South which today ranks second only to cotton in cash return.

Professor Carver said, "I thank you for being allowed to contribute in a small way, and wish you Godspeed." Then he packed up his specimens, walked to the freight elevator, out the back door, and rode in the Jim Crow car back to Tuskegee. No wonder the South made an idol of the sweet potato wizard: a Negro who was bringing prosperity to the region, yet humbly staying "in his place."

He appeared before a state legislature to urge aid in spreading sweet potatoes as a food crop. Seeing the old Negro shuffling up with the samplings and cuttings that he always carried with him for his talks, a legislator called out, "I see your taters, Uncle; where's your watermelon?" The assembly roared. But they listened as "Uncle" told them things no one of them knew about their own farms and their own crops. And partly from his teaching, the South now raises

sixty-two million bushels of sweet potatoes every year.

After a lecture by Carver at the University of Mississippi, Senator Bilbo shouted to the press, "What is the proud state of Mississippi coming to, having that peanut nigger from Tuskegee making an address?" He said he couldn't understand what any "nigger" could have to say that would interest white southern boys, much less white girls.

But worse than the spectacular rebuffs was the dreary routine of wounds and inconveniences that meet any Brown American, every day, everywhere he goes, no matter how wise or famous he may be. Such simple questions as where to eat and where to sleep are major crises to a Negro traveling as much as Carver did. If he was thirsty he could not drink from the usual cups or fountains, but must hunt around in the basement for a water jar marked "for colored." Local laws often forbade him to sleep under the same roof with a white man, and local custom barred him from all hotels, unless there happened to be a Negro hostelry or a colored Y.M.C.A.

And always there was the fear that, in spite of every care, he might be in the wrong place. Over and over, in trains or in restaurants, shopping in stores or resting on benches or looking at flowers in the parks, he would see a frowning white man charging toward him, and he would think with dread, "Oh dear! Here it comes again." Aside from nuisance and insult, the very publicity of being scolded and cursed by any white man, anywhere, any time, for any infraction of the color taboos, was painful to so retiring and modest a gentleman as Doctor Carver.

His lifelong study was the interrelationship of the soil, the plants that grow from the soil, and men and animals who live on the soil and its plants. Of this cycle of nature he must often have felt that man was the factor least able to be explained.

Certain it is that he found his greatest comfort in solitude

with nature. He worked and studied alone with few bonds to other men. He said to Mrs. Rackham Holt, who in 1943 brought out his biography: "Alone in the forest with the things I love most, I gather my specimens and study the lessons nature is so eager to teach us all. Nothing is more beautiful than the loveliness of the woods before sunrise. At no other time have I so sharp an understanding of what God means to do with me as in these hours of dawn. When other folk are still asleep, I hear God best and learn His plan."

But he was a student, not a hermit. And his studies were always leading him "to do something about it." Quoting his favorite text, "I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills from whence cometh my strength," he used to say: "Now that doesn't mean just to look at the hills without seeing anything. It means to search. I take it to mean that I should try to see with every method at my command—with chemistry, with physics, as well as with my eyes."

He never married. He said he once fell in love, but his girl complained that he was too dark, so he gave up courting. All his days at Tuskegee he lived alone in a downstairs room of one of the dormitories, his place always littered with plants and fabrics and paintings, with pieces of rope made from okra stalks, baskets woven from wistaria vines, pots full of clays, and old saucers running over with home-made dyes.

In every way Carver filled the picture of humble servant and absent-minded professor. On the campus and on his travels he wore shabby, baggy old clothes. So far as the records show he never had on a new suit in his life. He used to mend and patch his shirts and pants with his own hands. When they were too old to hang together any longer, he would sorrowfully go to the store—but never for new clothes; only for hand-me-downs.

He had no regard for money. He would regularly forget to cash his salary checks. To keep Tuskegee's bank balance



in any sort of order, the comptroller used to sneak over once or twice a year to Carver's rooms, fish out his checks from desk drawers and sometimes from under the mattress of his bed, and deposit them for him in the bank. In one of the Institute's campaigns for endowment, every member of the faculty was asked to give at least a dollar or two as a token. When a collector came to Carver, he said, "Why, I haven't got any money." Then, "Wait, will this help any?" he asked, and dug out a bundle of uncashed checks from his desk which added up to a total contribution of \$1500.

He would never consent to have any of his discoveries patented. "God gave them to me," he would say. "How can I sell them to someone else?" And he quoted a favorite text, "Behold, I have given you every herb yielding seed . . . and every tree. . . . So to you it shall be for food."

In the classroom, as his years and reputation grew, he inspired awe—and a little humor. His voice never outgrew its boyish cackle and in his old age it sometimes used to jump an octave in the middle of a sentence. Will Rogers, who once visited his classroom, said, "Professor Carver is the only man I ever knew who could lecture and sing tenor at the same time."

But students soon learned not to take liberties with him. Once the boys rigged up a new bug by pasting legs of one insect and wings of another onto the body of a cockroach. They spent hours in concocting a work of art and mystery. Laying it solemnly on his desk, they asked him what kind of bug it was. He peered at it with his sharp eyes. "I've never seen such a bug before," he said. Then, just as the boys were grinning at their hoax, he said, "I guess this is what you might call a humbug."

Carver is so well known for his work with peanuts and sweet potatoes that we may overlook many other things he did to help southern farming move toward some diversifica-

tion of crops and some saving of the soil. From his very first days at Tuskegee he was planting and preaching crimson clover as a cover crop, and cowpeas and hairy vetch. He was one of the first to understand the varied richness of soybeans, and to bring this crop into Alabama. Little publicized, one of his most valuable feats was the crossing of long-staple and short-staple cotton to produce a new standard that combined long, tough fibers with tall stalks, easy to pick.

He fostered the use of native clays for pottery and especially for paint. Asked if the colors of clay paints would last, he answered, "They have lasted there in those hills for thousands of years. I guess they will keep on holding fast for our lifetimes."

Along with his hours of work and study and experiment, Carver found time for the many other things he loved to do. He kept on painting, and his canvases have been hung in many exhibits: one is on order from the Luxembourg Gallery in Paris. Everything he used in his paintings he made out of waste or unused materials. The paper he made from peanut shells, the paints out of the earth of Alabama, the frames out of corn husks. He never lost the delicate skill with his fingers that he learned as a boy, and never blushed to exhibit fine embroidery and crochet and rugs woven from the fibers of cotton stalks. He kept his fondness for cooking, especially for concocting new dishes: his recipes are used today in many hotels. His hands have made music, too, with such skill that once he toured the Middle West as a concert pianist.

His products and his personality attracted many friends, rich and poor, humble and famous. Thomas Edison was an admirer and crony. He tried to get Carver to put his ingenuity to work in the great laboratories in New Jersey, but the professor knew that the place for his talent was in the South and on the farm. Henry Ford was another close friend.

Possibly because of Ford's interest in southern crops and their products, he was the only man who lured the old naturalist, even for a short time, to a northern post—as special consultant in the Ford laboratories.

Honors showered upon him. He was elected to membership in the Royal Society of Arts. His contributions to agriculture were recognized in America by such awards as the Spingarn and Roosevelt Medals.

In 1928 his old college at Indianola, Iowa, gave him the honorary degree of Doctor of Science. The president called him the school's most distinguished graduate, and said, "Among the cherished memories of Simpson College is that it did not fail you when you came knocking for admission, did not make race or color the basis for entrance."

In 1941 President Alan Valentine flew down to Tuskegee and gave him an honorary degree from the University of Rochester, saying: "Scientist, educator, benefactor of your people and America, true to the American tradition, you made every sacrifice to obtain the best education. . . . Recognition came slowly in the world of white men but, when it came, you neither scorned it nor were captivated by it. Because you have once again demonstrated that in human ability there is no color line . . . I confer upon you the degree of Doctor of Science."

His home state of Missouri has proudly placed markers on its highways directing travelers to the "Birthplace of George Washington Carver, Famous Negro Scientist," and the national government is purchasing his early home as a federal monument—the first such memorial to honor a Negro. The Catholic Conference of the South gave him the first of its annual awards for outstanding service to the welfare of the South. The United Daughters of the Confederacy adopted resolutions praising him.

An act that touched him more than many of these tributes

of the great was a statement drawn up by the students of the Mississippi State College for Women. When his scheduled lecture there was abruptly canceled and the students forbidden to go to the colored high school to which he had been shunted, the girls wrote a public apology to him in the school paper:

We were a bit hasty in last week's editorial . . . in predicting that the South's outlook was broadening. . . . The protest raised against Dr. Carver shows that it is still a state to be attained in the future. So far the South has only a superficial coating of tolerance. . . . Some of us are inclined to tuck our heads with shame. . . . But instead of sitting down and blushing, we should be up and doing something about it.

In 1942 the journal, *The Progressive Farmer*, selected him as "the man of the year in service to southern agriculture" and reported that "Carver takes his place among six eminent Southerners honored for outstanding contributions to agricultural progress." Commenting on this award, the *New York Times* said:

We hear a great deal about creative writing. Here is a creative artist who scatters plenty with a smiling hand. Like Agassiz, he never has had time to get rich. He could have made ten times his Tuskegee salary if he had been willing to enter the employment of commercial concerns. He has given his savings for the continuation of research. What other man of our time has done so much for agriculture and the South?

His popularity was greater among white people than among Negroes. One of his chief services was as an ambassador of good will between the races. And some of his associates have felt that his fame was blown up "to please the white folks." It is true that the farms about Tuskegee are

still poor and ill kept, and it is also true that he failed to raise up corps of eager and able students—the highest achievement of a great teacher.

Clear to the end the old naturalist followed his lifetime custom of rising every morning at four to go out into the woods to gather specimens and walk with nature. At nine he was back in his laboratory where he worked all day. And in the evening he followed another of his lifelong habits—going to bed at nine. His familiar figure, “stooped with age and wisdom,” was known to all the countryside.

The old Indian word “Alabama” means “here we rest.” In the soil of Alabama that he knew and loved so well, his frail body rests at the end of eighty years of study and service. His personality and his reverent love of nature, maybe more than his science, have built the legendary fame that will live long after him throughout America.

# SHAKESPEARE IN HARLEM



GORDON PARKS, O W I

LANGSTON HUGHES

# SHAKESPEARE IN HARLEM

**L**ANGSTON HUGHES has spent most of his life having a wonderful time. And when he is sad he writes poetry.

He's had some bad bumps, as every Negro must who lives in America. He pours out his wrath at injustices in stirring poems, and his disgust at the "ways of white folks" in ironic prose, and he is one of America's most prolific writers of sad and weary blues. But for the most part he is having too good a time dancing in the street carnival of life to brood bitterly over hurts.

He has never let life tie him down. He has never married. He is not chained by close relatives or dependents. He has chosen the freedom—and hazards—of free-lance writing rather than the security—and prison—of any steady job. He avoids even the ties of a regular home. "Six months anywhere," he says, "is enough to begin to complicate life. By that time, if you stay in one place you are bound to know people too well for things to be any longer simple." So he has lived all over the world, from Kansas and Harlem to Mexico, from California to Africa, with stops along the way in France and Italy, Russia and Central Asia.

When, one bright morning in Paris, young love was brought to an abrupt end, instead of cutting his throat he wrote a poem. He says, "I thought a lot about Mary after she went away. Then after a while I didn't think about her so much." So he wrote "The Breath of a Rose," \* which,

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\* Reprinted by permission of G. Schirmer, Inc., from whom the musical setting may be obtained.



set to music by William Grant Still, has become one of his best-known poems.

Love is like dew  
On lilacs at dawn:  
Comes the swift sun  
And the dew is gone.

Love is like star-light  
In the sky at morn:  
Star-light that dies  
When day is born.

Love is like perfume  
In the heart of a rose:  
The flower withers,  
The perfume goes—

Love is no more  
Than the breath of a rose,  
No more  
Than the breath of a rose.

His deeper emotions are stirred not so much by current joy and pain as by the enduring tie he feels to his Negro background. One of his well-known early poems was written as a train was carrying him down along the Mississippi. Wistfully thinking of other rivers his people had known, as the train rumbled along in the dusk, he took an envelope from his pocket and wrote on the back of it these lines that he called "The Negro Speaks of Rivers": \*

I've known rivers:

I've known rivers ancient as the world and older than the  
flow of human blood in human veins.

My soul has grown deep like the rivers.

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\* This, the following poems, and all of the quotations from *The Big Sea* are reprinted with the permission of Mr. Hughes and his publisher, Alfred A. Knopf, Inc.

I bathed in the Euphrates when dawns were young.  
I built my hut near the Congo and it lulled me to sleep.  
I looked upon the Nile and raised the pyramids above it.  
I heard the singing of the Mississippi when Abe Lincoln  
went down to New Orleans, and I've seen its muddy  
bosom turn all golden in the sunset.

I've known rivers:  
Ancient, dusky rivers.

My soul has grown deep like the rivers.

He felt an even deeper tie to the past when at twenty-one, sailing as a mess hand on a freighter, he came in sight of Africa. He says, "When I saw the dust-green hills in the sunlight something took hold of me inside. My Africa, Motherland of the Negro peoples! . . . And farther down the coast, it was more like the Africa I had dreamed about—wild and lovely, the people dark and beautiful, the palm trees tall, the sun bright, and the rivers deep."

"But there was one thing that hurt me a lot," he says. "The Africans looked at me and would not believe I was a Negro. You see unfortunately I am not black."

Far from black, Hughes is a light tan. And he has lived as much in the white man's world as in the colored realm. He was born and reared in the prairie states, in sections where there were few Negroes. He has white blood on his father's side from a Jewish slave trader; his mother's people were French, Irish, and Indian, as well as Negro. His friends and his reading public are of all races.

A Cherokee-Negro grandmother had most to do with his early raising. Shortly after he was born on February 1, 1902, in Joplin, Missouri, his parents separated. The father, disgusted with what he called the shiftlessness of his fellow-Negroes, moved to Mexico where he made a good living the rest of his life in the hustling, thrifty fashion of other Amer-

ican businessmen. His mother, who had studied at the University of Kansas, was unwilling to take the menial tasks open to Negroes in Missouri and moved about hunting for teaching posts or office work. So the little boy was left with his grandmother in the old family home in Lawrence, Kansas.

She was an old woman then, a proud old woman. She owned a small neat house on Alabama Street near the University of Kansas, with white neighbors all around her. She roomed or boarded an occasional colored student who was going to the University, or rented out half of her six-room house if she could find a small and "decent" family that wanted it. A little money trickled in from Langston's father and mother and from his "Uncle Dess" who kept a barber shop near by. A home garden furnished the food, and the grandmother did all the work about the house. She also sewed the clothes for herself and the boy, often making over hand-me-downs from the neighbors.

"It isn't what you wear, but what you are that counts," she used to say, though the jibes of his playmates at the girls' blouses and women's shoes he had to wear counted a good deal to Langston.

The grandmother was willing to work hard and to live poor, but she would not work as anyone's servant. Even in slavery time she had been free in North Carolina and, as a young woman, long before the Civil War, she had come North to study at Oberlin College in Ohio. She had married two distinguished men: Sheridan Leary, who gave his life fighting with John Brown at Harper's Ferry, and later Charles Langston, who had been active in the Oberlin station of the Underground Railway, a well-organized society for smuggling runaway slaves from the South to Canada. This second husband, Langston's grandfather, had come

with his bride to Kansas shortly after the Civil War and established the family home at Lawrence.

Langston remembers his grandmother, at that time long widowed from both her husbands, as a small brown woman with "a great deal of backbone, slightly bent but never bowed." She was deeply wrinkled, "like an Indian squaw," and had long straight Indian hair that came to her waist and that even at seventy was glossy black with only faint streaks of gray. The grandmother used to hold the small boy as she swung back and forth in an old-fashioned rocking chair, crooning Negro and Indian rhythms and telling long stories, sometimes made-up stories out of her head, more often true stories out of her memory of life in the South in the old days. On chilly evenings she used to pull over her shoulders a shawl dotted with a half dozen little round holes—the same shawl that Sheridan Leary had worn when he was shot at Harper's Ferry, and which he had asked to have sent back to her as he lay dying—the shawl that now is treasured among the Abolitionist mementos in the Ohio State Historical Museum.

The old lady was not fervently religious. She was a product of intellectual, Congregationalist Oberlin rather than of the shoutin' southern Baptists. She was very respectable. She raised the lad with firm discipline, though her taboos were more often against his exposing himself to the shame of Jim Crow than against the temptations of sin. He wasn't allowed to go to the theater because Negroes were herded into the back rows of the gallery. She wouldn't let him play with white children until she was "sure of their set."

This house was not Langston's only boyhood home. Occasionally for a few months or a year he went to stay with his mother—whenever in her restless wandering she happened to be making her home near Lawrence. One year he

lived at the edge of town by the banks of the Kaw River with friends of his mother whom he called Uncle and Auntie Reed. Twice he went for short stays with his father in Mexico. And after his grandmother's death, when he was about twelve, he rejoined his mother, who by that time had married again but had not stopped moving about, sometimes with her new husband, sometimes without. So his life and his schooling from his earliest days were in many places and his roots in none. It is natural that today the wide horizon is to him a fonder home than any fixed spot.

Of all his early homes he loved best the year with his Uncle and Auntie Reed. "They had chickens and cows," he recalls. "Uncle Reed dug ditches and laid sewer pipes for the city, and Auntie Reed sold milk and eggs to her neighbors. . . . Auntie Reed let me set the hens, and Uncle Reed let me drive the cows to pasture. Auntie Reed was a Christian and made me go to church and Sunday school every Sunday. But Uncle Reed was a sinner and never went to church as long as he lived. . . . In fact he washed his overalls every Sunday morning (a very grievous sin) in a big iron pot in the back yard, and then just sat and smoked his pipe under the grape arbor. . . . But both of them were very good and kind—the one who went to church and the one who didn't. And no doubt from them I learned to like both Christians and sinners equally well."

Throughout his school days Langston kept running into a disturbing complex of popularity and freedom, peppered and barbed by shocks of Jim Crow. In the Pinckney public school in Lawrence the few colored children from all six grades were herded into a single segregated room. When he moved on with the seventh grade to the Central School in Lawrence, he and the two other colored pupils were put in a separate row at the back of the room. In Topeka, he was sent to an all-colored school two miles across the tracks

until his mother won his admission to the school in his own district. The Y.M.C.A. swimming pools and the Boy Scout troops, so highly prized by his white playmates everywhere, were not for him.

But he did well in his studies and was popular with his fellows. "All the teachers were nice to me," he says, "except one who sometimes used to make remarks about my being colored. And after such remarks, occasionally the kids would grab stones and tin cans out of the alley and chase me home." Thus he found that prejudice is not natural but an infectious disease.

When life became too hard, he turned to books. "In Topeka, as a small child," he writes in his autobiography, *The Big Sea*, "I first fell in love with librarians, and I have been in love with them ever since—those very nice women who help you find wonderful books! The silence inside the library . . . the big chairs and long tables, and the fact that the library . . . didn't seem to have any sort of insecurity about it—all of that made me love it. And right then, even before I was six, books began to happen to me, so that after a while there came a time when I believed in books more than in people—which, of course, was wrong . . . the wonderful world in books—where, if people suffered, they suffered in beautiful language, not in monosyllables as we did in Kansas."

But he was too eager a person for books to hold him from people and the gay pageant of living. And he was too creative to read without beginning to want to write. When he was graduated from grammar school in Lincoln, Illinois, he was class poet. All through high school in Cleveland, Ohio, where he was also class poet, he kept gorging on poetry and novels. Carl Sandburg became his hero. And, along with general literature, he began even at this young age to read journals and tracts on social ills and "the revolution": *The Liberator*,

*The Worker's Monthly, Ten Days that Shook the World.* He was interested in dramatics and in writing plays as well as acting. All through high school he wrote stories and poems for the school monthly and took part in the school plays.

His mother was something of an actress too, and he would often join her in Sunday school plays and pageants. He remembers once when, as a small boy acting with his mother, he mugged her tragic role by slyly rolling his eyes in rhythm with her lamentations so that everybody laughed. When she found out what he had done, she gave him the worst whipping he ever had in his life.

"Then and there," he says, "I learned to respect other people's art."

All through his school days, and for many years thereafter, he earned his living by any odd jobs he could get, most often as bellboy or roustabout in a hotel. One of his very popular and very thoughtful poems pictures the menial life he knew—the only life known by millions of Negro "boys" whether they be six or sixty:

*Brass Spittoons*

Clean the spittoons, boy!

Detroit,

Chicago,

Atlantic City,

Palm Beach.

Clean the spittoons.

The steam in hotel kitchens,

And the smoke in hotel lobbies,

And the slime in hotel spittoons:

Part of my life.

Hey, boy!

A nickel,

A dime,

A dollar,  
Two dollars a day.  
Hey, boy!  
A nickel,  
A dime,  
A dollar,  
Two dollars  
Buys shoes for the baby.  
House rent to pay.  
Gin on Saturday,  
Church on Sunday.  
My God!  
Babies and gin and church  
and women and Sunday  
all mixed up with dimes and  
dollars and clean spittoons  
and house rent to pay.  
Hey, boy!  
A bright bowl of brass is beautiful to the Lord.  
Bright polished brass like the cymbals  
Of King David's dancers,  
Like the wine cups of Solomon.  
Hey, boy!  
A clean spittoon on the altar of the Lord,  
A clean bright spittoon all newly polished—  
At least I can offer that.  
Com'mere, boy!

At the end of high school his father sent for the boy to join him in Mexico, and Langston spent one dismal year helping his father's business. While he loved the Indians and the soft air and lazy native life, he hated the sharp trading and slave driving that brought money to his father. Anxious to free himself from dependence on his parent, he began giving private lessons in English to the daughters of wealthy Mexicans, but they kept breaking up the classes by falling in love with him.



So he came home. He spent the next year—almost as dismally—at Columbia University. Then for another year he studied by himself and worked at odd jobs around New York.

Fed up with this stale life and especially with study and books, he shipped on a freighter for Africa. "With that trip," he says, "I began to live." The first thing he did after the boat started was to throw every book he owned into the ocean. For three years he sailed and worked and wandered over Africa, the Americas, Europe, drinking in life as it flowed by—usually joyful, sometimes hungry, "sometimes so unhappy that I wrote a great many poems."

Whenever he touched Africa his feelings surged. Of one night in the Gulf of Guinea he wrote:

Sometimes life is a ripe fruit too delicious for the taste of man: the full moon hung low over Burutu and it was night on the Nigerian delta.

We walked through the quiet streets of the native town. . . . There were no pavements, no arclights. Only the wide grassy streets, the thatched huts and the near low-hung moon. Dark figures with naked shoulders, a single cloth about their bodies, and bare feet, passed us often, their footsteps making no sound on the grassy road, their voices soft like the light of the moon. Through the open doors of some of the houses fires gleamed. Women moved about preparing food. In the clearing, great mango trees cast purple shadows across the path. There was no wind. Only the moon. . . .

We crossed the dry bed of a creek. In the distance we heard the drums of Omali, the Ju-Ju. Their measured beating came across the swamplands at the edge of the forest. Tonight the natives danced to their gods. . . .

We turned back toward the docks and followed the river road. Hundreds of tiny house boats, each with its lantern on a slender pole, lay rocking at their moorings. The long, flat paddle-wheel steamers of the Niger were anchored in mid-

stream. The river flowed quietly under the moon. . . .

I climbed the rope ladder to the deck of the *Malone*. Far off, at the edge of the clearing over against the forest, I heard the drums of Omali, the Ju-Ju. Above the moon was like a gold ripe fruit in heaven, too sweet for the taste of man.

For a long time I could not sleep.

After two years of sailing and working and sailing some more, he stopped off for a lazy romantic year in Paris. Arriving in this world capital, broke as usual, he was given shelter by a little blonde Russian dancer who, with the surprising quick friendship of penniless Bohemia, shared with him her life and her sorrows and her francs until she went off for a lush but fleeting success in Le Havre.

Then he bought a blue cap with gold braid at the Flea Market and got a job as doorman at a night club on the rue Fontaine. But he was frightened by the fighting there between the lady customers, "who broke champagne glasses on the edge of the table and slashed at each other with the jagged stems." And he was staggered by the friend of the proprietress—"a tall Roumanian girl, with large green circles painted on her eyes, who often came to the club in a white riding habit, white boots and hat, carrying a black whip."

Later he got a job at the well-known club, the Grand Duc, and spent a wonderful winter. The star who sang there was the beautiful brown-skin girl, Florence Embry, known to all Paris simply as Florence. The Grand Duc was a favorite haunt of entertainers from all over the city who wandered in there after their own night clubs closed. Langston Hughes, as assistant cook and dishwasher, spent many happy mornings watching the dawn spread slowly over the Paris roofs, listening as these musicians would gather and play for themselves after playing all night for other people.

The cream of the Negro musicians then in France, like Cricket Smith on the trumpet, Louis Jones on the violin, Palmer Jones at the piano, Frank Withers on the clarinet, and Buddy Gilmore at the drums, would weave out music that would almost make your heart stand still at dawn in a Paris night club in the rue Pigalle, when most of the guests were gone and you were washing the last pots and pans in a two-by-four kitchen, with the fire in the range dying and the one high window letting the soft dawn in.

Blues in the rue Pigalle. Black and laughing, heartbreaking blues in the Paris dawn, pounding like a pulse-beat, moving like the Mississippi!

At the end of that year he went to Italy and lolled a summer away on the beach at Genoa. But the Fascists were beginning to warp the beauty even of Genoa and when an earthquake came and he was pulled out of bed by an excited German tourist shouting "Wake up! The earth is falling down!" he decided to come home. He moved slowly down through Naples and the Island of Capri to Valencia and Alicante in Spain. Then he shipped for America as workaway on a freighter very much like the one he had sailed out of New York on three years before.

When he got to America he found his mother and her young son, his half brother, living in Washington with cousins "who belonged to the high-class branch of our family, being direct descendants of John M. Langston, my grandfather's brother, who had been Congressman from Virginia during Reconstruction." Langston realized that he needed more education and, thinking vaguely of Howard University, joined his mother and her cousins in Washington.

Already many of his poems had been published, and Negro society in Washington tried to lionize him. He soon got too much of these "high-class relatives and the stiff and timid middle-class climbers of colored Washington." He gave up

a dignified position obtained for him with the *Journal of Negro History* for jobs in restaurants and laundries which seemed to him more self-respecting and more fun. Certainly they paid better. This was an embarrassment to high-brow friends who, when they ran into him, were torn between eagerness to show their friendship with a famous poet and shame at being seen speaking to a mess boy or laundry clerk.

From all this pretentiousness [he writes in *The Big Sea*], Seventh Street was a sweet relief. Seventh Street is the long, old, dirty street, where the ordinary Negroes hang out, folks with practically no family tree at all, folks who draw no color line between mulattoes and deep dark-browns, folks who work hard for a living with their hands. On Seventh Street in 1924 they played the blues, ate watermelon, barbecue, and fish sandwiches, shot pool, told tall tales, looked at the dome of the Capitol and laughed out loud. I listened to their blues:

*Did you ever dream lucky—  
Wake up cold in hand?*

And I went to their churches and heard the tambourines play and the little tinkling bells of the triangles adorn the gay shouting tunes that sent sisters dancing down the aisles for joy.

I tried to write poems like the songs they sang on Seventh Street—gay songs, because you had to be gay or die; sad songs, because you couldn't help being sad sometimes. But gay or sad, you kept on living and you kept on going. Their songs—those of Seventh Street—had the pulse-beat of the people who keep on going.

While he was weltering in the life of Seventh Street and working as bus boy at the Wardman Park Hotel, Vachel Lindsay walked into his life. Langston was used to cabinet members and millionaires at this swank hotel, but his knees knocked together when the great poet, one of his idols,

came. He copied three of his poems, "Jazzonia," "Negro Dancers," "Weary Blues," and put them in the pocket of his white bus boy's coat. At the dinner hour he shyly laid them at Vachel Lindsay's plate, murmured nervously that he liked Mr. Lindsay's poems, that he wrote poems too, and here were a few. Before the great man could pick them up, Langston fled. The next morning's papers carried headlines of Lindsay's "discovery" of "a Negro bus boy poet." Reporters and cameramen were waiting for Langston as he reached the hotel. Patrons stormed around him. From that day publicity has rushed out to meet him. This wave of popularity, and even more the solid generous praise of Vachel Lindsay, heartened the budding poet. He decided that whatever else he did he must finish college—which he proceeded to do at Lincoln University in Pennsylvania.

Vacations and the years just after college he spent in Harlem. Never was a better time for a handsome, lively young poet to be in New York. Of these years Hughes has written in *The Big Sea*:

The 1920's were the years of Manhattan's black Renaissance. It began with *Shuffle Along*, *Running Wild*, and the Charleston. Perhaps some people would say even with *The Emperor Jones*, Charles Gilpin, and the tom-toms at the Provincetown. But certainly it was the musical revue, *Shuffle Along*, that gave a scintillating send-off to that Negro vogue in Manhattan, which reached its peak just before the crash of 1929, the crash that sent Negroes, white folks, and all rolling down the hill toward the Works Progress Administration.

*Shuffle Along* was a honey of a show. Swift, bright, funny, rollicking, and gay, with a dozen danceable, singable tunes. Besides, look who were in it: The now famous choir director, Hall Johnson, and the composer, William Grant Still, were a part of the orchestra. Eubie Blake and Noble Sissle wrote the music and played and acted in the show.

Miller and Lyles were the comics. Florence Mills skyrocketed to fame in the second act. Trixie Smith sang "He May Be Your Man But He Comes to See Me Sometimes." And Caterina Jarboro, now a European prima donna, and the internationally celebrated Josephine Baker were merely in the chorus. Everybody was in the audience. . . .

Put down the 1920's for the rise of Roland Hayes, who packed Carnegie Hall, the rise of Paul Robeson in New York and London, of Florence Mills over two continents, of Rose McClendon in Broadway parts that never measured up to her, the booming voice of Bessie Smith and the low moan of Clara on thousands of records, and the rise of that grand comedienne of song, Ethel Waters, singing: "Charlie's elected now! He's in right for sure!" Put down the 1920's for Louis Armstrong and Gladys Bentley and Josephine Baker.

This was the time of the white vogue of Harlem night clubs, stirred to frenzy by Carl Van Vechten's sensational novel, *Nigger Heaven*. This was the time when a new all-Negro show appeared on Broadway every year. Preceding the popularity of Café Society, Harlem began to form what the wags call "Café au Lait Society." This was the time of the Harlem literati, whom Langston's friends dubbed the Niggerati; of Aaron Douglas and Countee Cullen, Zora Hurston and Jean Toomer and Claude McKay and James Weldon Johnson; of W. E. B. Du Bois editing the militant *Crisis* and keeping everyone in awe of his erudition and his reserve; of Charles S. Johnson giving a springboard to budding writers and artists in his magazine *Opportunity*; of Arna Bontemps, whom Hughes describes as a "rich, mellow personality whose wife, shy and charming, couldn't mingle much because she was producing a new golden baby every year or two, each more beautiful than the last"; of Alain Locke coming up from Howard University as informal

publicist of the Renaissance; of Bessie Smith, the blues singer, who once, not recognizing the opera star Margarita D'Alvarez as she sang at a mixed party, rushed up to her and cried: "Don't let nobody tell you you can't sing"; of A'Lelia Walker, the hair dekinck heiress, "a gorgeous dark Amazon, in a silver turban, who gave lavish parties in town, and in her country mansion at Irvington-on-the-Hudson, with pipe organ programs each morning to awaken her guests gently."

Langston Hughes was in the midst of all this Negro Renaissance. He was a part of the gaiety and frolic. And his lilting poetry and stirring prose were a part of the creativeness that made this period truly a renaissance.

During this period Hughes brought out three books of verse; a novel, *Not Without Laughter*; and a book of bitingly ironic short stories, *The Ways of White Folks*. His work was hailed by critics and reviewers, but viciously attacked by most Negroes. The custom had been for colored authors to write bitterly about the prejudices of white people or stiffly about very cultivated Negroes. Hughes wrote of black laborers and roustabouts and streetwalkers. He wrote "sweet blues about no-account darkies." The *Pittsburgh Courier* ran a headline clear across the top of a page, "Langston Hughes' Book of Poems Trash." Other colored papers called him "The Sewer Dweller" and "The Poet Lowrate of Harlem." Occasionally a poem of wistful beauty would win over his own people, such as "A House in Taos" which begins:

Thunder of the Rain God:  
And we three  
Smitten by beauty.

Thunder of the Rain God:  
And we three  
Weary, weary.

Thunder of the Rain God:  
And you, she and I  
Waiting for nothingness.

Do you understand the stillness  
Of this house in Taos  
Under the thunder of the Rain God?

Then his whole Negro audience would be shocked by such a poem as the one beginning:

Put on yo' red silk stockings,  
Black gal.

Or they would be puzzled by the frankness of such poems as "Cross":

My old man's a white old man  
And my old mother's black.  
If ever I cursed my white old man  
I take my curses back.

If ever I cursed my black old mother  
And wished she were in hell,  
I'm sorry for that evil wish  
And now I wish her well.

My old man died in a fine big house.  
My ma died in a shack.  
I wonder where I'm gonna die,  
Being neither white nor black?

By the end of the twenties America's boom era and the feverish vogue of Harlem ran out together. But not the zest for life of Langston Hughes, nor his steadily creative work. The spring of 1931 he spent in Haiti, and he has woven the life of this Black Republic into much of his later writing. The next year he toured the South lecturing and reading his poems in the Negro schools. He loved the students and



the workers, and they liked him and his poetry much better than the teachers and professional people did. The next two years he spent in Russia working on a Soviet film and in a leisurely tour of China, Japan, and Hawaii.

He was deeply impressed by Russia, and his lifelong friendships among common people have given him a fervent interest in social reform. He has always leaned to the left in political thinking, though he is too free and rollicking a spirit to be an orthodox member of any "church," even the Party church.

All this time, traveling or living in America, he has been writing. Like any genius, Langston Hughes writes by fits and starts; long barren periods end in a sudden burst of creative zest and lead in turn to months on end "when no words come." Some of his friends say he is a dilettante. Some say he is plain lazy. But his treasure of poems and prose steadily grows. His verse appears in national magazines almost every month, and every year or two he gathers his poems into another volume, the latest of which is *Shakespeare in Harlem*. In 1940 he brought out his autobiography, *The Big Sea*, carrying his life up to 1930 when he "began to eat regular" and when he joined the slender ranks of men in America who make their entire living by creative writing. A continuation volume of his life is expected soon. He has written many dramas. One of them, *Mulatto*—greatly mangled in order to appeal to white theatergoers—had a fairly successful run on Broadway. He has done many scripts for the movies, but he is disgusted at the farcical treatment Hollywood still gives to all Negro actors and Negro writers. Increasingly he writes and reads for the radio. His published works, including one-act plays, articles, skits, and incidental verse run far beyond a hundred titles.

He has received Guggenheim awards, Rosenwald fellowships, literary prizes, interracial medals, honorary degrees.

But nothing can lure him into formal or high-brow roles. His income is never too large or too steady to keep him from informal, close-to-earth living.

He is beloved by hosts of friends, one of the few men who seem to be equally popular with white and colored people of all classes, with men and women. He is handsome, boyish in his eagerness, easy and natural in his manners. His eyes and his whole personality sparkle. He is as modest a man as ever lived, free of arrogance or prejudice, balanced with a keen and subtle sense of humor.

When I last saw him, in the summer of 1943, he was living in New York with his "adopted uncle and aunt," Emerson and Toy Harper, friends of his family since Kansas days. Mrs. Harper, who traveled for years with shows and circuses, is now a dress designer for theatrical celebrities. Her husband is a Harlem musician and composer. Their three-room apartment is a beehive: Mrs. Harper giving a fitting in the hall before the mirror, while a seamstress is busily running the sewing machine in the bedroom, the husband practicing a cadenza on his oboe in the living room, and Langston Hughes clattering away on his typewriter in the kitchen. It is a *You-Can't-Take-It-with-You* setting, with visiting Brazilian authors, relatives from Kansas City, ladies preparing their wardrobes, all walking about while doorbell and telephone go on merrily ringing and ringing.

Hughes likes to work out his articles, skits, and incidental verse in such hectic settings. But he does his sustained work late at night when he is free of interruptions, starting at midnight and running on to three or four in the morning, or even into the dawn.

While he is not keen on night clubs, he enjoys quiet parties. He is a great teller of tall tales. In a group of friends he delights to recall bizarre episodes or spin yarns out of his head. He often adds flavor by dropping into lush dialect or by

acting out his tales with enough poetic license to keep the crowd bubbling with laughter.

He loves the excitement of city streets: fights, fires, the gay throng. Often before he begins a night's work he walks and walks, thinking out his thoughts and phrases amid the excitement and adventure of the crowds. "City streets," he says, "are the best theater in the world—especially the streets of the teeming South Side in Chicago. Here one can see drama fresh and vital every day and every night; or one can draw within himself on a busy street and enjoy a privacy more protected than any study."

His zest does not keep him from feeling deeply the wrongs of Negroes and of all people who suffer from the cruelty of mean men. His hurts do not keep him from full and joyous living, though even his most musical verse often carries a wistful note or a biting irony. These qualities appear in the poem "Merry-Go-Round" which pictures a colored child just up from the South looking for Jim Crow at a carnival.

Where is the Jim Crow section  
On this merry-go-round,  
Mister, 'cause I want to ride?  
Down South where I come from  
White and colored  
Can't sit side by side.  
Down South on the train  
There's a Jim Crow car.  
On the bus we're put in the back—  
But there ain't no back  
To a merry-go-round!  
Where's the horse  
For a kid that's black?

While he resents discrimination and the failure of America to live up to its promises, his deepest allegiance and his hope for the future are tied to the country of his birth. He says:

This is my land America. My ancestry goes back at least four generations on American soil—and through Indian blood, many centuries more. I am old stock as opposed to recent immigrant blood.

Yet many Americans who cannot speak English—so recent is their arrival on our shores—may travel about the country at will securing food, hotel and rail accommodations wherever they wish to purchase them. I may not. These Americans, once naturalized, may vote in Mississippi or Texas, if they live there. I may not. They may work at whatever job their skills command. But I may not. They may purchase tickets for concerts, theaters, lectures wherever they are sold throughout the United States. I may not. They may repeat the Oath of Allegiance with its ringing phrase of "liberty and justice for all," with a deep faith in its truth—as compared to the limitations and oppressions they have experienced in the Old World. I repeat the oath, too, but I know that that phrase about "liberty and justice" does not fully apply to me. I am an American—but I am a colored American.

I know that all these things are not *all* true for *all* localities *all* over America. Jim Crowism varies in degree from North to South, from the mixed schools and free franchise of Michigan to the tumble-down colored schools and open terror at the polls of Georgia and Mississippi. All over America, however, against the Negro there has been an economic color-line of such severity that since the Civil War we have been kept most effectively, as a racial group, in the lowest economic brackets. Statistics are not needed to prove this. Simply look around you on the Main Street of any American town or city. There are no colored clerks in any of the stores—although colored people spend their money there. There are practically never any colored streetcar conductors or bus drivers—although these public carriers run over streets for which we pay taxes. There are no colored girls at the switchboards of the telephone company—but millions of Negroes have phones and pay their bills. Even in Harlem,

nine times out of ten, the man who comes to collect your rent is white. Not even that job is given a colored man by the great corporations owning New York real estate. From Boston to San Diego, the Negro suffers from job discrimination.

Yet America is a land where, in spite of its defects, I can write this article. Here the voice of democracy is still heard—Roosevelt, Wallace, Willkie, Agar, Pearl Buck, Paul Robeson. America is a land where the poll tax still holds in the South—but opposition to the poll tax grows daily. America is a land where lynchers are not yet caught—but Bundists are put in jail, and majority opinion condemns the Klan. America is a land where the best of all democracies has been achieved for some people—but in Georgia, Roland Hayes, world famous singer, is beaten for being colored and nobody is jailed—nor can Mr. Hayes vote in the state where he was born. Yet America is a country where Roland Hayes *can* come from a log cabin to wealth and fame—in spite of the reactionary segment that still wishes to maltreat him physically and spiritually, famous though he is.

This reactionary segment is not all of America. If it were, millions of Negroes would have no heart for this war in which we are now engaged. If it were, we could see no difference between our ideals and Hitler's, in so far as our own dark lives are concerned. But we know, on the other hand, that America is a land in transition. And we know it is within our power to help in its further change toward a finer and better democracy than any citizen has known before. The American Negro believes in democracy. We want to make it real, complete, and workable—not only for ourselves—the thirteen million dark ones—but for all Americans all over the land.

# DEEP RIVER OF SONG



DELAR

MARIAN ANDERSON

# DEEP RIVER OF SONG

**O**N AN Easter afternoon in the nation's capital, streams of people came pouring into the great mall, crowding about the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, flowing down all along the plaza to the Washington monument. Seventy-five thousand people: senators and ditch diggers; a justice of the Supreme Court and hundreds of janitors, icemen, and porters; members of the President's cabinet and thousands of clerks from the government bureaus; white citizens and Negroes. Sober, earnest, eager, the crowd came to hear a concert and to right a wrong, to take part in a resurrection of brotherhood and democracy in America.

Marian Anderson, the Negro contralto, had been refused the use of Constitution Hall, ironically enough by the D.A.R., the professed daughters of the very men who had given their lives to build this new nation of freedom and equality. This insult to democracy had been more than the American people would stand. Outcries arose all over the country. Preachers and public citizens denounced it. Heifetz, scheduled to appear in the hall that had refused Miss Anderson, declared, "I am ashamed to play there." Walter Damrosch and Deems Taylor issued protests in the name of the nation's musicians. Mrs. Roosevelt publicly resigned from the D.A.R. As a national protest, a people's committee arranged a concert by Miss Anderson on Easter Sunday of 1939, using the steps of the Lincoln shrine as the platform and the great open mall of Washington as the auditorium.

As the hour approached, clouds that had been covering the sky opened, and the sun shone bright and clear. The



Secretary of the Interior, custodian of the nation's public grounds, introduced the singer. As the clear deep voice of Marian Anderson rang out, the huge assembly stood silent in joy and reverence. As she sang "America" and "Nobody Knows de Trouble I See" there were tears in her eyes and in her voice, and upon the sea of uplifted faces, black and white, came a new baptism of liberty, fraternity, equality. On this Easter Day a great singer became a national symbol.

Marian Anderson was raised in song. Her parents had lived during their early years in Virginia, amid spirituals and work songs and the gay rhythm of banjos and guitars. They brought the love and the habit of music with them when they moved from the rural South to one of the great industrial cities of the North. In her home, in the church and Sunday school, in the lives of her neighbors, Marian was in the midst of music.

In Philadelphia, Negroes for forty years have been steadily moving into a neat section of middle-class homes five to fifteen blocks south of City Hall and stretching west from Broad Street for a dozen squares. Many of the streets are lined with solid rows of little red brick houses with green shutters and white marble steps that had been built in this typical Philadelphia style by the earlier white owners. Into one of these little houses on Martin Street, Marian Anderson's parents moved shortly after they came up from Virginia. Marian was born there in 1908, grew up in this South Philadelphia area and, in spite of her recent wide travels, makes her permanent home with her mother in a comfortable house on the same block as the old family home.

Marian's mother, with light-brown skin and quiet manners, had been a school teacher in Virginia, and all her hard-working life kept the poise of a well-educated person. Her father, much darker, had been a southern farm boy with little schooling. He was a fine strapping man, six feet tall,

a hard worker, and a solid member of the community. The neighbors remember him as a dignified usher in the old Union Baptist Church. He ran a little business of delivering ice and coal and added to his scant income by any odd chores about the great city that he could get. The mother worked, too, as servant, washerwoman, caretaker in the big Wana-maker store, anything she could find to do between the borning of three daughters.

When these girls were little more than babies the father died, and one of his sisters, "a widow woman, Aunt Mary Pritchard," moved in to help raise the three orphaned children. But Aunt Mary as well as the mother had to keep on working out most of the time to get money to run the household. Marian, as the eldest child, helped about the house and in the care of her little sisters from the time she could walk and fend for herself, and after her father's death she became one of the main props of the family.

But the life of the Andersons was not dull. There was gaiety and always music. The colored community was warm and friendly. A household of three little girls was usually full of company. The mother carried her teacher's habits into reading to the children, telling them stories, and seeing to it that they did their lessons. The father, while he lived, and Aunt Mary after him, were always singing about the house in their deep rich voices and always urging the girls to sing and play.

All three of the children had good voices and a love of music. With Marian music was a passion. As early as her fourth year she was known as a good little girl because she would sit quietly, endlessly strumming on a wooden bench, at a make-believe piano, while she sang over and over the spirituals and hymns she had learned at home or in Sunday school.

At six she began to long for a violin. She found one in a

pawnshop window marked \$3.40 and at once began "laying by" to get it. She earned nickels and dimes any way she could, chiefly by scrubbing the white stone stoops that were so plentiful in Philadelphia.

"Scrubbing steps," Miss Anderson says today, "is not nearly so hard as it looks. You just take two pails full of water, use one for scrubbing with plenty of soap and a stiff brush and the other for rinsing with clean water and a long-handled mop. If you're working with another little girl, scrubbing is fun. It's about the easiest money I ever earned."

Family and friends helped swell her pile of coins. Meanwhile, shrewd little Marian had been testing the instrument and bargaining with the pawnbroker until she had brought him down to a flat \$3. Then, presto! one fine spring morning the fiddle was hers. She sawed diligently on this violin, "making noises," a neighbor says, "that were not near so sweet as her own singing." Two years later, when she was eight, a piano was added to the house, and Marian felt that she was a musician sure enough.

The center of music in South Philadelphia, as in most colored communities, was the church. And the Union Baptist Church, at the corner of Fitzwater and Martin Streets, was the foster home of Marian's musical life. Here she sang in the Sunday school choir and, after she was fourteen, in the church choir too. Here the gifted choir leader, Alexander Robinson, started her voice in the way it should go and gave her reverence for music as "a beautiful rhythmic communion with God and man." Here she held her early concerts. Friends in the congregation praised her voice, raised little sums to enable her to study under local teachers, and finally established a trust fund called "Marian Anderson's Future" which made possible her expert training.

Her school work seems to have been neither better nor worse than that of thousands of other American children.

She went to the old Stanton Grammar School, which stands today as it did then at the corner of Seventeenth and Christian Streets, and later to the Penn High School. "But I didn't like Penn," she reports, "stiff people and stiff courses. And it didn't like me."

So she moved to the more progressive South Philadelphia High School for Girls which was under the direction of Dr. Lucy Langdon Wilson, a great teacher and an inspiration to the thousands of girls who came under her spell. She was the first white person to be an influence in Marian Anderson's life. Interestingly, she is the only woman besides Miss Anderson who has ever received Philadelphia's Bok award for distinguished service. This school, then and now, served many of Philadelphia's lowly groups: Italian immigrants, Jews, Poles, and a steadily swelling number of Negroes. Contrary to Penn, this school liked Marian, and she liked it. She was popular as a student. Ever since, she has been held up to entering classes as the finest example of the kind of woman the school hopes to produce.

"During all the school years," a neighbor reports, "she did a plenty of chores at home. The only thing she wouldn't do was sew. None of the Anderson girls would make a dress or mend a tear. They would have gone around naked if their mother and aunt hadn't worked so hard, and the neighbor women chipped in with new dresses now and then and with mending old ones."

But school and chores at home never stopped Marian's music. Soon the singing which had always been a hobby and a pleasure became a means of support. Well before she was ten she was earning her share of the family upkeep by singing in concerts that the churches and clubs were always giving, and pretty soon she was giving concerts of her own. She remembers her first billing for a little community affair—"Marian Anderson, the Ten-Year-Old Contralto"—and she

remembers wondering at the untruth, for she was only eight!

Her wide range of voice was developed even in her early years as she learned all four parts of every hymn so that she could fill any emergency. If the soprano was absent from the church choir, Marian sang her part. If the basso didn't appear, the leader would say, "Marian, will you take the bass today?" and her deep voice, though an octave higher, would richly fill the part.

The church began to take pride in this sweet child singer. While she was in her earliest teens, little collections made possible lessons from Mrs. Saunders Patterson, a colored teacher in the neighborhood. The pastor of the church, the Reverend W. G. Parks, was interested in forwarding Negro talent of every sort. He was the man who first brought Roland Hayes to Philadelphia to sing at one of the church concerts. He boosted the child singer of his own congregation by sponsoring solos and concerts by her before Negro groups in Philadelphia and in near-by towns. At the Sunday School Convention in Harrisburg when she was not yet fifteen she sang "Open the Gates of the Temple" and got state-wide acclaim that brought her many other calls.

Marian was a good business woman from early childhood. Once, in singing for a well-to-do fraternal group, she raised the fee of \$5 that was customary in her world to \$10, and after some haggling won out. The chairman of the committee said to her mother, "That girl of yours is going to make money out of singing. I wouldn't be surprised if some day she made \$50 a concert." "Of course," her mother says, "we all knew he was crazy."

By the time she had finished high school she was well known, at least among her own group in Philadelphia, and set out to make music her career. Her friends were glad to

back her. The Philadelphia Choral Society, made up of members of many of the colored church choirs, sent her to work with Agnes Reifsnnyder, a leading white contralto and teacher of the city. Grant Williams, editor of the Philadelphia Negro paper, made a crusade of bringing her to public notice and arranged a concert for her at Philadelphia's Witherspoon Hall. Later she shared a concert in the Academy of Music with Roland Hayes and thus began to be associated in people's minds with this tenor, who at that time led in national popularity.

It was not all smooth sailing. Concerts sometimes did not pay expenses. The kind of teaching she wanted was hard to get. She was brusquely turned away from one conservatory with the statement, "We don't take colored." But friends kept cheering her on, and finally her high school teacher, Miss Wilson, persuaded David Bispham and Giuseppe Boghetti to hear her. Boghetti remembers that first audition "at the end of a long hard day, when I was weary of singing and singers, and when a tall calm girl poured out 'Deep River' in the twilight and made me cry."

Boghetti became her teacher. Entering her in a competition against three hundred contestants for an appearance at Lewisohn Stadium, he said to her, "Even if you get the gong, keep on singing so the judges can hear the vibrations at the end." The gong did not sound. She was chosen for this concert, a first great step in her national fame.

Right after the Lewisohn concert she was put under contract by a well-meaning manager. But nothing happened. No good engagements came along. Everyone said, "A wonderful voice; it's too bad she's colored." It was clear that if she was to make a success at home she must first be acclaimed abroad. A Rosenwald fellowship made possible European study in 1930, and four years later she was ready to crash the gates of the world in a gala tour of Europe.

Second only to her triumph at the Easter concert on the Washington mall, she remembers her public debut in France. In 1935 this dark daughter of America was scheduled for a concert at the Paris Opera in what was then the world capital of tolerance and of the arts. Two thousand music lovers and people of fashion, along with critics from many parts of Europe and America, came to appraise the singer. And in the audience sat Marian's mother, brought all the way from her humble home in Philadelphia to be present at this event which meant fame or failure.

As Miss Anderson stepped onto the platform before this tense and critical audience, she says, "I felt I must give up my struggle for applause. Seeing not the European audience but the warm friendly faces of my own people, I just sang from my heart to them and to my mother." She sang Russian folk songs and classic German and French arias. And she sang Negro spirituals. In surging response to the soul of the singer as well as to the deep river of her song, the audience shouted its acclaim. Her fame was sealed. Her mother, smiling quietly in the middle of the hall, was content.

The European tour was a triumph. She sang in Salzburg and Berlin, and at command performances before King Gustav in Stockholm and King Christian in Copenhagen. Miss Anderson laughs at some of the amusing incidents that happened to the simple Baptist choir girl on this gala tour of Europe.

Invited to the Quirinal Palace in Rome by Crown Princess Marie José, she sang before four reigning queens. As she finished her program and started demurely to leave the room, the horrified major domo rushed up and hissed in her ear, "Please, Miss Anderson, please! Queens first."

She remembers as a precious incident her visit to Sibelius in response to one of his rare invitations. As she entered his studio, Sibelius said to his butler, "We will have coffee."

But after she sang, he shouted, "No, no! Not coffee, champagne!" When she left his home Sibelius said as he pressed her hand, "My roof is too low for you." He later dedicated to her his song, "Solitude."

All Europe surrendered to her gladly, wildly, during this tour. Toscanini, hearing her, exclaimed, "A voice like that comes only once in a century." Sol Hurok, scouting at one of her recitals, rushed backstage to sign up her American appearances—and he has managed her concerts ever since, just as Boghetti has continued to be her teacher and guide since he first heard her sing "Deep River."

Backed by this European acclaim, her own country was ready to receive her. A great home-coming concert was arranged for her in New York City on December 30, 1935. But returning on the *Ile de France* she broke her ankle just before the boat docked, only one day before the concert. Nothing daunted, she had her foot set in a cast and made her great American debut standing on one foot, and suffering excruciating pain. But no one in the audience knew. The awkward cast was covered by her long gown, and her pain was submerged in the river of song she poured out in this triumphant home-coming festival.

Since then her fame has steadily grown. The rebuff by the D.A.R. and the resulting Easter tribute on the Washington mall sealed her popularity. Interestingly, the magazine *Variety*, in its report of the most highly paid concert singers, lists three Negroes among the top ten—three times the quota that Negroes would rate on the basis of their proportion of the population: Marian Anderson, Paul Robeson, and Dorothy Maynor, each receiving more than \$100,000 a year from their concerts.

Miss Anderson has a vast repertoire of some two hundred songs in nine languages. She handles them all with ease and power but her heart is still in the spirituals, the songs of her



own people, which she sings in generous numbers at every concert. The amazing range of her voice, that even in her youth enabled her to take any part in the church choir, is shown in her current singing of such arias as "The Erl King" and "Death and the Maiden" by Schubert in which she covers three octaves, the full range of two normal voices.

Miss Anderson has a grave, broad face of solid modeling, serious in repose, passionate in singing. She has light-brown skin, luminous dark eyes, and a fine figure and carriage. She is always beautifully gowned. In prewar times Chanel and Molyneux of Paris designed her clothes. There is a good deal of interest in the world of fashion as to what American costumer she will patronize. She did not always show such good taste in clothes. Her Philadelphia neighbors remember a concert when she was sixteen or seventeen when her girlhood vanity burst out in a black lace dress covered with bright sequins. It was long before her friends could persuade her that this pretentious creation of fluff and spangles was "not just her type."

She has always been thrifty, and no one need fear that she is letting the large sums she now earns slip carelessly through her fingers. She has invested in a good deal of real estate in Philadelphia as well as in sound securities, including generous purchases of War Bonds. A few years ago she bought a beautiful place for herself just outside Danbury, Connecticut. She raises her own chickens and fruits and vegetables as well as gardens of flowers. The ten-room house on this estate has, in addition to the large studio, a well-stocked library and a playroom in which she is finally learning to sew. This handicraft, which she scorned as a child, is now becoming a hobby. She carries a little electric sewing machine along with her on her travels, and last summer she spent the early mornings before her rehearsals at a school for dress-making and interior decoration. She is proud of a pair of

denim slacks she made for herself to work in her Connecticut garden, which have earned for her the title of "The Denim Queen of Fairfield County."

Miss Anderson has few close friends. Kosti Vehanen, her coach and pianist, is one of the few who is constantly near. She clings to the loyalties of her childhood. The old Philadelphia crowd that centered in the Union Baptist Church are still her dearest friends. The close tie between her and her mother grows warmer every year. Unhappily, Aunt Mary Pritchard, who had been such an inspiration to her childhood singing, died before full fame came to Marian. As triumph follows triumph, the old neighbors sigh, "Isn't it too bad that Aunt Mary isn't here? Wouldn't she be proud?"

Every time she gets back to Philadelphia she makes the rounds of her girlhood friends, asking eagerly, "What is the latest dirt?" then drops cross-legged on the floor, talks gossip of the old gang and the new arrivals and laughs and chats over "the good old days in South Philadelphia." A sister Alice, unmarried, lives with her mother and often serves as aide and traveling companion to Marian. The youngest of the sisters, Ethel, is married to James De Priest, a contractor and builder, and lives next door to the family home on Martin Street. Her little son is Marian's godchild. The sisters are gayer than Marian, always ready to kick up their heels and have fun, but Marian is gay too if she knows the people she is with and feels at home.

As her fame and obligations grew, she tried having a maid to do for her, help her pack, and tend her clothes. But she says, "It was a nuisance. I couldn't ever find anything. And I didn't like being bothered by a person fussing around me." She now tends herself, does her own packing and primping, even irons her own gowns on the days of her recitals. She tried having a secretary, too. But she hates to write letters.

Like many famous Negroes, she shuns the heavy routine of correspondence. She even seems rude sometimes in making no answer at all to the thousands of invitations, appeals, and general letters that pour in on her. When people can get to her she is gracious and cordial. She has befriended many a struggling young singer and has set aside the fund received with the Bok award to be given in aid "to talented American artists without regard to race or creed." But it is harder to get to her than to the President, and even her friends complain, "Nobody ever gets a letter out of her, nobody."

In her own home or with close friends she delights to sit in her favorite posture, cross-legged on the floor, listening quietly for hours to the radio. While she is not much on night clubs and big parties, she loves the theater and the movies. She is witty and vivacious. She often laughs and tells—sometimes with gay exaggeration—of the "incidents" that still beset her because of her color.

Many of these incidents happen in her visits to southern cities. Only after a solid national fame was she willing even to venture into the South. She had more calls than she could fill in northern cities where she was assured of respect. And maybe she remembered Roland Hayes' early experience when, invited to sing at a fashionable club in Louisville, he found himself placed behind a screen. However much they wanted to hear his beautiful tenor voice, the members could not bring themselves to risk the sight of a Negro in the "halls of gentlemen." Recently she has accepted a number of southern engagements with the usual artistic success but not without some personal affronts.

Her opening concert in Memphis was packed with a fashionable, music-loving audience. In general they surrendered to her spell just like audiences everywhere. At the close of the concert she came out, as she always does, leading her white accompanist onto the stage with her, holding his hand.

There was a shocked pause at this violation of southern taboo, then thunderous applause. The critics were as abandoned as the audience, but were troubled about what to call her in their reports. The papers bristled with "Marian Anderson," "Artist Anderson," "Singer Anderson," anything to avoid the dreadful need of saying "Miss Anderson." Anyway, no reporter thought it necessary to call her "Marian." And the critics broke the southern stereotype by calling her beautiful and describing her clothes.

In another southern city, a white family that had been entertaining her took her to the train and, without thinking, walked with her into the white waiting room. A guard rushed up shouting, "Get that nigger out of here." When the protests of the white hosts did no good, the whole party had to wait outside the station, for the letter of the segregation law also forbids whites to use the room for colored.

Odd slights pursue this dark-skinned artist even in northern and western cities. To avoid rebuffs she keeps closely within herself, and when traveling stays at the homes of friends, or at hotels where she is assured of welcome. To avoid the slights so common to Negroes on Pullman cars, she has made many of her tours in her own automobile. In Los Angeles a hotel which was glad to furnish living quarters balked at letting her eat in the public dining room. Instead of having service in her room, she remembered a little roadside tavern that had cordially served sandwiches and coffee as she was driving into the city, so she went every day far out of town to this place to eat in grateful remembrance of its hospitality.

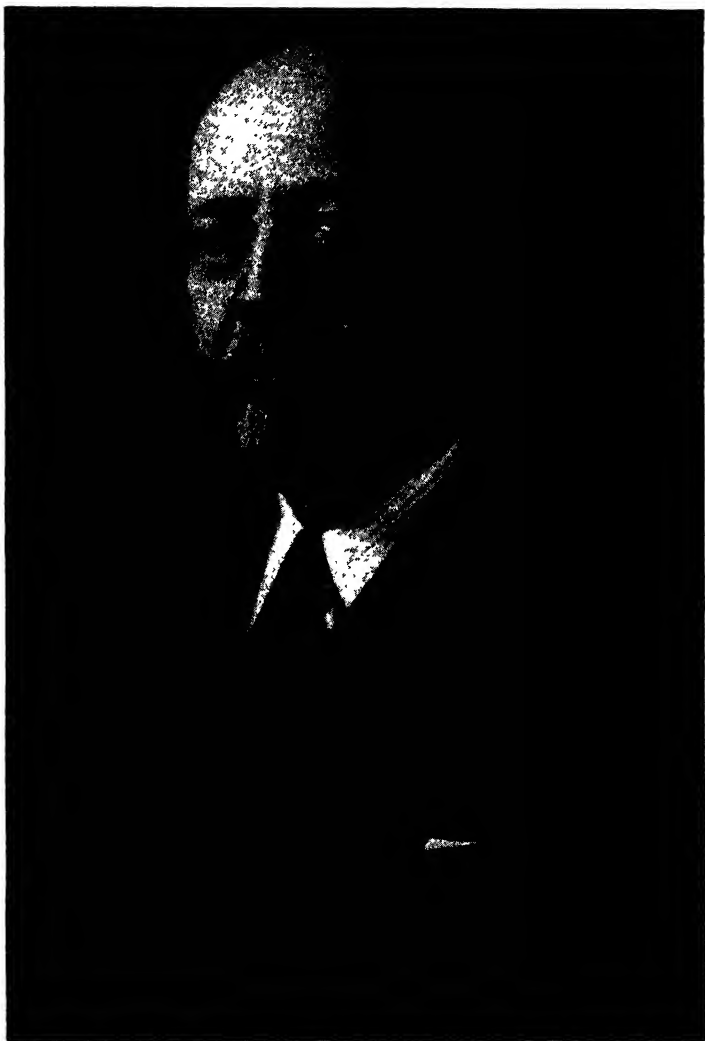
It is not easy for any happening now to upset this well-poised person. The acclaim of the crowned heads of Europe and the slights that beset her in America are taken in even stride. But she confesses to being flustered at her first meeting with President Roosevelt. He had invited her to meet

King George and Queen Elizabeth on their visit to the White House in 1939. She had mulled over the etiquette of meeting royalty. But as she walked into the reception room President Roosevelt's voice boomed out in hearty greeting: "Why Miss Anderson, you look just like your pictures." Forgetting all about royal curtsies, she rushed over and clasped the President's hand. "He is the greatest man I ever met," she says, "I kept wanting to cry."

Marian Anderson is not only one of America's greatest singers, she is one of America's favorite personalities. Her modesty and simplicity, her charm, and the warm rich personality that comes sweeping across the footlights with her songs have given her a special place—almost a shrine—in the hearts of millions. Among her own people she is a goddess. Her concerts are always attended by hundreds of Negroes, whether they can afford it or not.

Two years ago she was given the Spingarn award for "that American Negro who has made the highest achievement in any honorable field of endeavor." In presenting the medal Mrs. Roosevelt said, "Your achievement far transcends any race or creed." A year ago the directors of Washington's Constitution Hall offered atonement for their former rebuff by inviting her to give the great concert in the drive for the United Servicemen's Organization. The Bok award by the City of Philadelphia in 1941 was merely formal recognition that the brown-skinned choir girl, who had scrubbed so many of the city's steps, had become one of Philadelphia's most distinguished citizens.

# ELDER STATESMAN



SCURLOCK

W. E. B. Du BOIS

# ELDER STATESMAN

**W**ILLIAM EDWARD BURGHARDT DU BOIS breaks every mold into which the average American tries to put "The Negro." Born not in the southern rurals but in New England, educated at Harvard and Berlin, his features not black but finely chiseled in bronze, precise in speech, erudite, fastidious and haughty, he is a Boston Brahmin.

But he is a brown Brahmin. With talents and learning far above most of his white neighbors, he has been interned in that shadowy half world we have rigged up for the darker tenth of our population regardless of their individual merits. The segregation and the slights which beset this distinguished gentleman every day of his life in America have eaten into his soul. They have not stunted his mind, nor dulled his eloquence. They have simply turned the whole force of his keen and gifted personality into passionate warfare against the wrongs of color-caste in the United States and throughout the world.

For fifty years, with a pen dipped in gall, he has written in trenchant, classic English what he has deeply felt and deeply studied. The text of all his sermons and his deeds is "color: the unfinished business of democracy." Now, in the fullness of years, serving as professor at that ancient citadel of Negro hopes and learning, Atlanta University, he is the elder statesman of his race.

Du Bois was born on February 23, 1868, in Great Barrington, a little city among the Berkshire hills of western Massachusetts. He has written:



I was born by a golden river and in the shadow of two great hills. . . . But my birthplace was less important than my birth time. The Civil War had closed but three years earlier and 1868 was the year in which the freedmen of the South were enfranchised and for the first time as a mass took part in government. . . . Less than a month after my birth Andrew Johnson passed from the scene. . . . The Fifteenth Amendment enfranchising the Negro as a race became law and the work of abolishing slavery and making Negroes men was accomplished, so far as law could do it. Meanwhile elsewhere in the world there were stirring and change which were to mean much in my life: in Japan the Meiji Emperors rose to power the year I was born; in China the intrepid Empress Dowager was fighting strangulation by England and France; Prussia had fought with Austria and France, and the German Empire arose in 1871 . . . while in Africa came the Abyssinian expedition and opening of the Suez Canal, so fateful for all my people.\*

"All my people" takes in a great deal of territory, for Du Bois has in his veins the blood of all the great races of man. On his father's side were French Huguenots who came to this country in 1674 and whose life with Negro women threw this branch of the family into the colored group, though his own father—small, handsome, olive skinned—was no darker than his New England neighbors. His mother's people were of the Dutch Burghardt clan which since the early seventeen hundreds has been prominent in Dutch colonial history, especially in the Berkshire valleys. Two hundred years ago a black slave boy, Tom, and later a lithe, comely African girl, Violet, were woven into the family tree. And through a grandmother, married to the easygoing, good-natured Othello Burghardt, came an In-

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\* This quotation and all those that follow, unless otherwise indicated, are from *Dusk of Dawn*, and are reprinted with the permission of Harcourt, Brace and Company.

dian strain and more Dutch blood. Part of the Burghardt family are living in New England and the Middle West with no knowledge of their Negro blood. But the Burghardt-Du Bois family in Great Barrington always thought of themselves as Negroes and threw in their lot with "the colored race." Of his heritage, Du Bois has written:

With Africa I had only one direct cultural connection and that was the African melody which my great-grandmother Violet used to sing. . . . Coming [from Africa] to the valleys of the Hudson and Housatonic, black, little and lithe, she shivered and shrank in the harsh north winds, looked longingly at the hills, and often crooned a heathen melody to the child between her knees, thus:

Do bana coba, gene me, gene me!  
Do bana coba, gene me, gene me!  
Ben d' nuli, nuli, nuli, nuli, ben d' le.

The child sang it to his children and they to their children's children, and so for two hundred years it has traveled down to us and we sing it to our children, knowing as little as our fathers what its words may mean, but knowing well the meaning of its music.

In his New England village, the tie to Africa was sentimental rather than real. "Living with my mother's people," he says, "I absorbed their culture patterns, and these were not Africa so much as Dutch and New England. The speech was idiomatic New England tongue with no African dialect; the family customs were New England." His manners, speech, and cool reserve to this day are tribute to the deep impress of New England raising.

There were few Negroes in this Massachusetts town and most of those were old residents well known to their neighbors. His own family were among the oldest inhabitants of the valley. He went as a matter of course to the Great Bar-

ington public schools from the primary grades straight through high school. During these years he did chores at home and earned part of his keep by shoveling coal into a "base burning" stove in a millinery shop, selling papers, delivering tea for the A & P stores, now and then selling pieces to the city papers—much the same things that other ambitious schoolboys were doing in Massachusetts and all over America.

He ran into few slights in school or among his playmates. He was a keen student, and the teachers liked to have him in their classes. He was a passable athlete, a rare story teller, a popular young lad, very much like all the other youngsters in this New England school. Prejudice ran stronger against the Irish than it did against the few very respectable Negroes of the valley. Once, during an exchange of gaudy dime-store calling cards that had become the rage in school, a white girl coldly refused his card. But the shock was more surprise than hurt. He had a healthy conceit of his own brains and abilities; whenever racial feeling crept into his early life he was able to cover the bitterness by disdain of his less talented and paler fellows.

"Another dark young man," Du Bois says, "had attended the school for a short time, but I was very much ashamed of him because he did not excel the whites as I was used to doing."

Meanwhile the town and countryside were a boy's paradise. "There were mountains to climb and rivers to wade and swim; lakes to freeze and hills for coasting. There were orchards and caves and wide green fields." And all the boys and girls in this puritan village gave much more time to these rustic pleasures than to sociables and dances.

At sixteen he was graduated from high school. Like most New England schoolboys his ambition was to go to Harvard. But there was no money, and anyway he lacked the special

preparation to meet the narrow entrance examinations of that day. He went to work for a year, at a dollar a day, as timekeeper in the building of a blue granite mansion for the widow of Mark Hopkins, the railroad king. At the end of the year, on a scholarship set up by four New England churches, he went to Fisk, the colored "mission college" in Nashville, Tennessee.

He grieved to miss Harvard, but he knew he would get there some day. Meanwhile, it was a joy to cross the Ohio River and plunge into the life of the masses of his own people in the South—"the whole gorgeous color gamut of the American Negro world; the swaggering men, the beautiful girls, the laughter and gaiety, the unhampered self-expression . . . to be among people of my own color or rather of such various and extraordinary colors . . . who it seemed were bound to me by new and exciting and eternal ties."

But he found evil in the South as well as beauty and color: discrimination in ways he had never dreamed of in his New England village—in trains and living quarters, in schools and courts—prejudice and insult and violence, utter disregard of liberty and the pursuit of happiness, even of life itself if it were in a colored skin. During the nine years of university study that started at Fisk, from 1885 to 1894, Du Bois counted 1700 Negroes lynched in America—"each death a scar upon my soul."

In the summers he went out into the country to teach and saw the dire poverty of the tenant farmers, starving as they raised "cash crops for the masters," baffled and defeated not so much by tedious, endless, unpaid toil as by what Du Bois calls "the Veil fixed between them and opportunity."

In writing of the school he taught at \$28 a month in rural Tennessee, he says, "The schoolhouse was a log hut where Colonel Wheeler used to shelter his corn. It sat in a lot behind a rail fence and thorn bushes, near the sweetest of springs.

There was an entrance where a door once was, and within a massive rickety fireplace; great chinks between the logs served as windows. A pale blackboard crouched in the corner. My desk was made of three boards and my chair, borrowed from the landlady, had to be returned every night. Seats were rough plank benches without backs and often without legs."

But he loved his pupils and gave them teaching and inspiration that more than made up for the scant furnishings. "There they sat," he says, "nearly thirty of them on rough benches, their faces shading from pale cream to a deep brown, the little feet bare and swinging, the eyes full of expectation. . . . We read and spelled together, wrote a little, picked flowers, sang, and listened to stories of the world beyond the hill."

On Friday nights he often went home with some of the children and learned that there could be sturdy lovable personalities amid poverty and prejudice—and that there could be shiftlessness and crime, too; that white folks were not the only mean folks.

Fisk and the South gave an education that this brown New England boy needed, maybe more than all the book learning he could have got at Harvard. Furthermore, there were some good teachers at Fisk. The early crop of fine New England scholars were still in charge.

"Adam Spence," he says, "first taught me to know what the Greek language meant. In a funny little basement room crowded with apparatus, Frederick Chase gave me an insight into natural science. I knew the President, Erastus Cravath, to be honest and sincere."

At Fisk he began his writing and public speaking. He edited the *Fisk Herald* and delivered orations in college and out, lashing at the color bar.

Graduated from Fisk in 1888, he would—had he not been

reared in New England—have shouted “Glory Hallelujah,” for at last he was going to Harvard. He had applied for one of the scholarships that Harvard was offering in an attempt to bring in a student body from the whole country. To his joyous surprise he got it and went off for four years of college and graduate study.

Harvard was everything he hoped and wanted. He avoided slights by passing up the whole of social life, which he could scarcely afford anyway. His only contact with college life was in intellectual contests or student honors. He pieced out his expenses by a prize in the Boylston oratorical contest, and then helped stage a student revolt against restricting class honors to Back Bay socialites, which ended in a surprise to the whole nation—the election for class orator of a Negro, Clement Morgan, who had been a prize winner with him in the Boylston orations. Du Bois was one of six seniors chosen for commencement speaking, and took for his subject “Jefferson Davis,” which the *Nation* reported he handled “with absolute good taste, great moderation, and almost contemptuous fairness.”

During the four rich years at Harvard he threw himself into study, reading, and fellowship with his professors. Harvard was good hunting for an eager student. He became a close friend as well as a pupil of William James. He had long talks with Josiah Royce and read Kant’s *Critique* with Santayana. Nathaniel Shaler, “who made the eons of geology a living thing,” became attracted by Du Bois’ keen mind and ordered out of the class a Southerner who objected to sitting with him. Albert Bushnell Hart discussed with him the tides and meanings of history and appointed himself counselor to his graduate study. Barrett Wendell, the pundit of Harvard English, once brusquely demanded of the colored boy what he wanted in his class. Du Bois replied in a long written statement which ended: “I believe foolishly perhaps, but

sincerely, that I have something to say to the world, and I have taken English 12 in order to say it well." Wendell chuckled, read the sentence to the class as an illustration of trenchant English, and from that day gave "this colored boy" all he had. Charles Eliot Norton, Frank Taussig, George Lyman Kittredge, while not close friends, were inspiring teachers. And although they were retired from active teaching he had some contact with the mellow personalities of Oliver Wendell Holmes and James Russell Lowell.

All this learning and these great teachers simply whetted the hunger of the eager student, and he decided to broaden the base of his knowledge by foreign study. He bombarded ex-President Rutherford B. Hayes of the newly established Slater Fund and fairly cudgeled that board into giving him a fellowship of \$750 a year for two years' study in Germany. When the grant came Du Bois rushed down for a talk with President Hayes at the old Astor House and, walking on air away from the hotel, so far forgot his New England reserve as to plunge into a shop and buy a gaudy silk shirt for the fabulous sum of \$3.

He sailed away in a Dutch boat and began that fascinating experience—the first trip to Europe. Landing in Holland, still a little giddy with his good fortune, he wrote gaily: "Holland is an extremely neat and well ordered mud puddle, situated at the confluence of the English, French, and German languages." He reveled in a slow quiet summer before beginning his studies. He sailed up the Rhine with a Dutch family, having his first easy social intercourse with Europeans. He wandered big-eyed over historic ground,

"I had been before, above all, in a hurry," he says. "Now at times I sat still. I came to know Beethoven's symphonies and Wagner's *Ring*. I looked long at the colors of Rembrandt and Titian. I read in arch and stone and steeple the history and striving of men and also their taste and expression."

In the fall he registered at the University of Berlin, and again was happy in the great masters around him. Rudolph Virchow, famed pathologist of the nineteenth century, was rector of the university. He sat under "the fire-eating Pan-German, von Treitschke." He became pupil and friend of half a dozen scholars who at that time were putting German learning at the top of the world.

In the long vacations he visited the ancient German cities, traveling cheaply and living with the common people, speaking their common language in their homes or hostels. He toured Italy, visited Vienna and Prague and Budapest, and got as far east as Polish Cracow.

Everywhere he saw the German empire spreading over Central Europe. Everywhere he felt the pulse of European conquest of the world—in the newspapers, in state planning, in village gossip. The white man's destiny was an axiom, the only questions were whether Germany or England, France or Holland or Belgium would get the richest spoils. The student was so caught up in "the best thought of the time" that he almost accepted the slogans of European dominance. But he kept worrying and doubting. He was interested in the downtrodden Poles and Czechs as much as in the conquering Germans. He had long talks about Polish problems with Stanislaus von Estreicher (who died in 1940 in Germany's latest attempt to master the world). And he kept thinking of Africa and Asia, of the rights and the gifts of colored peoples the world over.

He returned home in the late summer of 1894 by way of a long visit in Paris, leaving himself just enough money for passage to America in the steerage amid a shipload of immigrants. At home, just as in Europe, he felt the rumblings of what seemed to him then—and now—the greatest of modern problems: the clash of race and democracy. Lynchings, which had continued a terrible 200 a year during most



of his university life, had risen to a new high two years before his return with 235 mob murders in 1892, and not one of the murderers punished. Race riots were killing not only Negroes but Italians in New Orleans and Chinese in California. Congress was preparing to repeal the Force bills, the last of the Reconstruction acts that gave legal protection to the citizenship rights of Negroes, and to adopt the first of the exclusion acts against Orientals. In the Paris which he had just left, the Dreyfus case was showing an ugly symptom of anti-Semitism that has since surged forward under Nazi might. China and Japan were starting the first of the series of wars for control of the Orient that have been raging ever more violently to this day. In South Africa the Dutch Kruger was fighting the English, and Du Bois kept wondering why so much sentimental gush was poured out for the Boers or the British and none at all for the native peoples of Africa who were being ground to serfdom by both factions. Du Bois was among the first to see clearly the strange spectacle of democratic Europe and America enslaving all peoples outside themselves; he was among the first to prophesy the chaos that has come from the clash of race egotism.

In America, at twenty-six, after twenty years of study, Du Bois felt himself ready for a job. He taught for two years at Wilberforce, a Negro college which had started as a station on the Underground Railroad just on the freedom side of the Ohio River. He landed there, he reports, "with the cane and gloves of my German student days, with my rather inflated ideas of what a 'university' ought to be, and with a terrible plainness of speech that was continually getting me into difficulty. When, for instance, the student leader of a prayer meeting, into which I had wandered casually to look local religion over, suddenly and without warning announced that Professor Du Bois would lead us in prayer, I simply answered, 'No, he won't,' and as a result

nearly lost my job." He taught Latin, Greek, English, and German. It must have been a strange scene: the hordes of ill-prepared Negro boys and girls at this pious school struggling to meet the high-brow standards of the Prussianized schoolmaster, in subjects that meant so much to him and nothing at all to most of them.

As the most exciting event in the Wilberforce years he reports, with his usual restraint, "I met the slender, quiet, and dark-eyed girl who became Mrs. Du Bois in 1896. Her father was the chef in the leading hotel of Cedar Rapids, Iowa, and her mother a native of Alsace."

He moved on for a year's appointment at the University of Pennsylvania to make the earliest of the intensive studies of a Negro community: *The Philadelphia Negro*, published in 1899.

Then he went to his great work in Atlanta. For thirteen years he taught at Atlanta University, carried on careful studies of Negro problems, prepared and directed the notable series of annual conferences which crystallized the thinking and study of that period. The reports of these conferences were carefully edited and published year after year until a file of 2172 pages was assembled—a vast encyclopedia, widely used then and now, on Negroes in church, school, and business, on Negro health and Negro crime, on Negroes' efforts for their own betterment, even on Negro morals and manners.

These years at Atlanta formed the sturdy trunk about which all the tree of his life has grown. He was working right in the midst of the toughest problems of his race, in the Deep South, in the dank soil of a state which had in its own population a million Negroes. His sensitive soul felt every hurt of his people. His keen brain grappled with the basic problems of making a living and of learning to climb the rough road of modern civilization. His scholarly mind as-

sembled the facts and pointed ways toward salvation not only for Negroes but for the whole South where Negroes have been at the core of both its prosperity and its stagnation. His brilliant, bitter pen painted telling and terrible pictures, scourged the sinners, exhorted the mourners.

During the first decade of this century Burghardt Du Bois was probably the most thoroughly educated man, the deepest scholar and most gifted writer in the city of Atlanta. Yet, in the strict segregation of those days, there could be no contact between him and the world around him. Black workmen and maids were all over white homes and business houses. From casual, careless contact with that servant class Southerners built their faith, "we know the Negro." But no educated colored man was allowed to touch the white world. If he entered a streetcar, he was pushed to a Jim Crow seat in the back. Du Bois, whose private library was one of the gems of the city, could not enter the public library. Drama and music were closed to him save on the most humiliating terms.

He in turn despised the city, lived almost as if it didn't exist. He never boarded a streetcar, but walked or took a cab. He never crossed the threshold of theater or opera. He held himself to his own campus and to such trips as were required by his studies and his lectures. Often visitors from the North or from abroad came and, to the horror of all proper Atlantans, insisted on climbing the hill at the western edge of the city to glean wisdom from this untouchable.

Du Bois has raged all his life at "this stupidity of segregation." He had lived on terms of equality and friendship with great men at Harvard and Berlin. He had traveled more widely and thought more deeply than one in a million of the Georgia whites who regarded him as something so far beneath them as scarcely to be human. He hated the sharp-nosed, shallow-faced, shrill-voiced Anglo-Saxon, and he

hated the cruelty and stupidity of American caste. He believed almost fanatically in his race. He loved the Negro's beauty and color, the boisterous, rhythmic gaiety, the laughter and the songs. He would not give up the colored world, and he would not give up the achievements and standards of the white world. He wanted an America big enough to include all its people, wise enough to enrich its civilization with the special gifts of every group. To this bitter fight he dedicated his life.

Occasionally a wail would burst forth as he viewed the Negro's plight—as in these lines which he printed in a collection of essays called *The Souls of Black Folk*:

Why did God make me an outcast and a stranger in mine own house? The shades of the prison-house closed round about us all: walls strait and stubborn to the whitest, but relentlessly narrow, tall, and unscalable to sons of night who must plod darkly on in resignation, or beat unavailing palms against the stone, or steadily, half hopelessly, watch the streak of blue above.

After the Egyptian and Indian, the Greek and Roman, the Teuton and Mongolian, the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world. . . . It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.

The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife—this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self. In this merging he wishes neither of the older selves to be lost. He would not Africanize America, for America has too much to

teach the world and Africa. He would not bleach his Negro soul in a flood of white Americanism, for he knows that Negro blood has a message for the world. He simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American, without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of Opportunity closed roughly in his face.\*

During these Atlanta years, a son was born to him—and after eighteen months, sickened and died. All sorrows, however personal, were to Du Bois bordered by the veil of caste and segregation. He wrote "Of the Passing of the First Born" which was also published in *The Souls of Black Folk*. Years later a man, reading this essay to a group of friends, choked when he came to the lines of "awful gladness," flung the book down and cried, "No man has a right to utter such terrible sorrow."

Within the Veil was he born, said I; and there within shall he live,—a Negro and a Negro's son. Holding in that little head—ah, bitterly!—the unbowed pride of a hunted race, clinging with that tiny dimpled hand—ah, wearily!—to a hope not hopeless but unhopeful, and seeing with those bright wondering eyes that peer into my soul a land whose freedom is to us a mockery and whose liberty a lie. I saw the shadow of the Veil as it passed over my baby, I saw the cold city towering above the blood-red land. . . .

So sturdy and masterful he grew, so filled with bubbling life, so tremulous with the unspoken wisdom of a life but eighteen months distant from the All-life,—we were not far from worshipping this revelation of the divine, my wife and I. . . .

He died at eventide, when the sun lay like a brooding sorrow above the western hills, veiling its face; when the

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\* This and the two following quotations are from *The Souls of Black Folk*, by W. E. B. Du Bois, reprinted by permission of the publishers, A. C. McClurg & Co.

winds spoke not, and the trees, the great green trees he loved, stood motionless. I saw his breath beat quicker and quicker, pause, and then his little soul leapt like a star that travels in the night and left a world of darkness in its train. The day changed not; the same tall trees peeped in at the windows, the same green grass glinted in the setting sun. . . .

We could not lay him in the ground there in Georgia, for the earth there is strangely red; so we bore him away to the northward, with his flowers and his little folded hands. . . . The busy city dinned about us; they did not say much, those pale-faced hurrying men and women; as we bore him to the station they did not say much,—they only glanced and said, "Niggers!"

All that day and all that night there sat an awful gladness in my heart,—nay, blame me not if I see the world thus darkly through the Veil,—and my soul whispers ever to me, saying, "Not dead, not dead, but escaped; not bond, but free." No bitter meanness now shall sicken his baby heart till it die a living death, no taunt shall madden his happy boyhood. . . . Well sped, my boy, before the world had dubbed your ambition insolence, had held your ideals unattainable, and taught you to cringe and bow. Better far this nameless void that stops my life than a sea of sorrow for you.

In 1910 Du Bois left teaching, partly because there was not yet, at any Negro center, support for the kind of thorough scientific study that he was doing, and partly because the crass abuses of his people forced him to more direct action. There followed twenty-five years of direct warfare against the color bars.

He became director of publications and research for the newly formed National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. He founded the magazine *Crisis* which became the powerful spokesman of Negro rights, the forum for discussion of color and democracy, the platform for

Negro expression of every sort. Under Du Bois' direction *Crisis* wielded influence for a quarter of a century. It kept the color question actively before the thinkers of the nation, month after month, year in and year out. It introduced to many people, who did not know such folks lived, Negro writers, thinkers, crusaders. Its circulation ran to 100,000 in the period of tension just after the First World War. *Crisis* was in the militant, defensive field what Charles Johnson's *Opportunity* later became in the positive program of expanding opportunities and expression.

Du Bois led the aggressive wing of the Negro movement demanding all civil rights, accepting no compromise this side of full citizenship and free opportunity. He openly differed with Booker Washington, fearing that he and Tuskegee were yielding too much in the effort to appease southern sentiment.

Du Bois claimed, "Negroes must live and eat and strive, and still hold unfaltering commerce with the stars."

Booker Washington seemed to say, "Don't hitch your wagon to a star; hitch it to a mule."

The quarrel between Du Bois and Washington, "the two greatest Negro leaders of their times," was a clash of temperaments as well as ideas. Washington was ever boiling with enthusiasm, rough and ready, eager for any action that offered a leg up to the Negro masses; Du Bois was cold, aloof, so committed to abstract justice that he disdained anything this side of absolute equality. Booker Washington, himself a southern Negro, educated at a southern Negro school, planted his feet squarely in the South, cried "put down your buckets where you are" and urged his people to stop either crying or aspiring and learn to labor and to wait. He probably did more than any other man to rally southern support to Negro education. But Du Bois feared he was doing even more to fasten "the Negro in his place."

As he was starting to his new tasks in New York, Du Bois called a great conference at Niagara Falls and launched the "Niagara Movement" to offset Booker Washington's policy. Du Bois said:

So far as Mr. Washington preaches Thrift, Patience, and Industrial Training for the masses, we must hold up his hands and strive with him, rejoicing in his honors and glorying in the strength of this Joshua called of God and of man to lead the headless host. But so far as Mr. Washington apologizes for injustice, North or South, does not rightly value the privilege and duty of voting, belittles the emasculating effects of caste distinctions, and opposes the higher training and ambition of our brighter minds,—so far as he, the South, or the Nation, does this,—we must unceasingly and firmly oppose them. By every civilized and peaceful method we must strive for the rights which the world accords to men.

Through the N.A.A.C.P. and *Crisis* Du Bois fought bitterly for every right promised to all citizens by the United States Constitution. By legal action, carried when necessary clear up to the Supreme Court, he and his associates fought against the devices to curb Negro voting, against the attacks on Negro lives and property, against unequal salaries for Negro teachers and unequal schools for Negro children, against every discrimination aimed at race or creed and especially color. And Du Bois' bitter, brilliant writing stirred an ever-widening circle, both white and colored, to join the battle for freedom and equality.

He built, for the first time in America, a strong bloc of Negro opinion. And in this again he found himself opposed to Booker Washington, though both men were working by different means toward "a Negro movement" and a national awakening to the full meaning of democracy. Up to 1910 Negroes had taken their leadership almost wholly from



white men. They bowed before enemies and bowed also, however gratefully, before friends. Washington showed the world that a Negro could direct a college and lead a popular cause quite as successfully as a white man. Du Bois' stinging hammer blows made Negroes "aware of themselves, confident of their possibilities, determined in self-assertion." Much of what today are common slogans among the more militant Negro leaders are taken bodily from Du Bois' speeches and writing. So effective was his crusade that it is hard to remember how radical and even fantastic his demands sounded thirty years ago.

Constantly he was thinking of colored peoples not only in America but all over the world. He organized the "Congress of Races" in 1911 in London and a notable series of Pan African Congresses—in 1919 in Paris; in 1921 in London and Brussels; in 1923 in London and Lisbon; and in 1927 in New York. He organized a group in Geneva to keep the rights of Africans before the League of Nations. Eight tours ranging from a few weeks to many months were given to study and crusading for economic as well as political rights for colonial and colored peoples; tours that in addition to Western Europe covered Spain, Portugal, Turkey, Russia, and Africa. On the question of color bars around the world he was as far ahead of current thinking as he was on Negro rights within America.

Du Bois pointed out forty years ago the curious coincidence whereby the rights of men were beginning to gain headway in Europe at just the time that Europe was conquering the rest of the world. So the freedom of white men waxed as the freedom of colored "colonial" peoples waned. He has been pointing out ever since that the world cannot exist half slave, half free.

"The disinherited darker peoples," he said, "must either

share in the future industrial democracy or overturn the world."

Only with the shock of the Second World War are statesmen beginning to catch up with his thinking, to see that the world today is fighting to gain freedom for India as well as to save it for England, that the enslaving of Java and Malaya is as vicious as the enslaving of Holland or France, that democracy in China is all of a piece with democracy in Norway—or Alabama.

As time went on Du Bois became more and more interested in the economic base of Negro progress. He began to differ with his associates in the N.A.A.C.P. because, while they clung to the defense of Negro rights, he wanted to work on a program of linking Negroes to the progress of the common man in labor, in farm organization, in co-operatives. To carry out that work and to find again full scope for the teaching and study that he loved, he returned in 1936 to a professorship at Atlanta University, the scene of his early labors.

William Edward Burghardt Du Bois is now the elder statesman of his race. He and his "slender, quiet, dark-eyed" wife are older and a little quieter than they were in the first Atlanta era. In their attractive apartment on the Atlanta campus they enjoy the visits of their daughter Nina, their only child save the first-born son who died before he had to endure the "sea of sorrow, within the Veil." But the elder statesman is still crusading. He teaches with all the regularity and strict standards that he learned at the German universities. Students do not get very close to him, but they feel the distinction of his scholarship and his personality. He has founded a new magazine, *Phylon*. And he has thrown himself as formerly into organizing conferences and directing vast co-operative studies, which today stress economic opportunities for all the common men of labor and of farming.

Of the three phases of his career—crusader, writer, scholar—his personal manner is purely scholar. A little vanity perhaps appears in his neat, well-tailored clothes, in his nicely groomed hands, and his carefully tended Van Dyke beard. But chiefly he is the dignified, restrained, almost shy, gentleman from New England. While he has hundreds of devoted admirers he has not attracted warm friends. Probably not in his whole life has anyone slapped him on the back in careless good fellowship; certainly no one has dared try it twice! As is often the case with such men, his closest friendships have been with women. A few very warm relationships may have made a general circle of intimates less necessary. He also shows a tenderness and ease with his grandchildren and with other very young people that he seldom has with adults.

Because of the kind of man he is it has not been easy to write a living biography. While I have been seeing him and working with him for twenty years I do not feel I know him warmly or well. There is none of the easy friendship that I feel, for example, with Charlie Johnson or Langston Hughes or Mrs. Bethune, none of the gay buzz-buzz of an evening with Walter White or the pleasant "at homeness" of an evening with Still, none of the glow that there is in running into the fire of Richard Wright or the magnetism of Paul Robeson. Yet Du Bois is one of the men I admire most. To an extent beyond that of any man I know, his force and his influence come solely from his keen and courageous mind. His own statement is, "My leadership was wholly in ideas. I never was, nor ever will be, personally popular. I withdrew from the personal nexus, but I sought all the more to force home essential ideas."

The chief record of such a life is the volume of sound scholarship that bears his name. His books are legion, ranging from historical research to essays and poetry and fiction.

His papers and magazine articles are legion more. And the files and tomes of his careful and exact studies exceed them all.

Du Bois will be remembered best by those rare masterpieces that combine his passion for justice and his talent for writing. One of the finest examples is a prose poem written after the race riots of 1906, the same riots that left so deep a mark on Walter White. It is entitled "A Litany at Atlanta." \*

O Silent God, Thou whose voice afar in mist and mystery  
hath left our ears an-hungered in these fearful days—  
*Hear us, good Lord!*

Listen to us, Thy children: our faces dark with doubt are  
made a mockery in Thy Sanctuary. With uplifted  
hands we front Thy Heaven, O God, crying:  
*We beseech Thee to hear us, good Lord!*

We are not better than our fellows, Lord; we are but weak  
and human men. When our devils do deviltry, curse  
Thou the doer and the deed,—curse them as we curse  
them, do to them all and more than ever they have done  
to innocence and weakness, to womanhood and home.  
*Have mercy upon us, miserable sinners!*

And yet whose is the deeper guilt? Who made these devils?  
Who nursed them in crime and fed them on injustice?  
Who ravished and debauched their mothers and their  
grandmothers? Who bought and sold their crime, and  
waxed fat and rich on public iniquity?  
*Thou knowest, good God!*

. . . . .  
A city lay in travail, God our Lord, and from her loins  
sprang twin Murder and Black Hate. Red was the mid-  
night; clang, crack, and cry of death and fury filled the

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\* From *Darkwater*, by W. E. B. Du Bois, 1920, reprinted by permission of the publishers, Harcourt, Brace and Company.

air and trembled underneath the stars where the church spires pointed silently to Thee. And all this was to sate the greed of greedy men who hide behind the veil of vengeance!

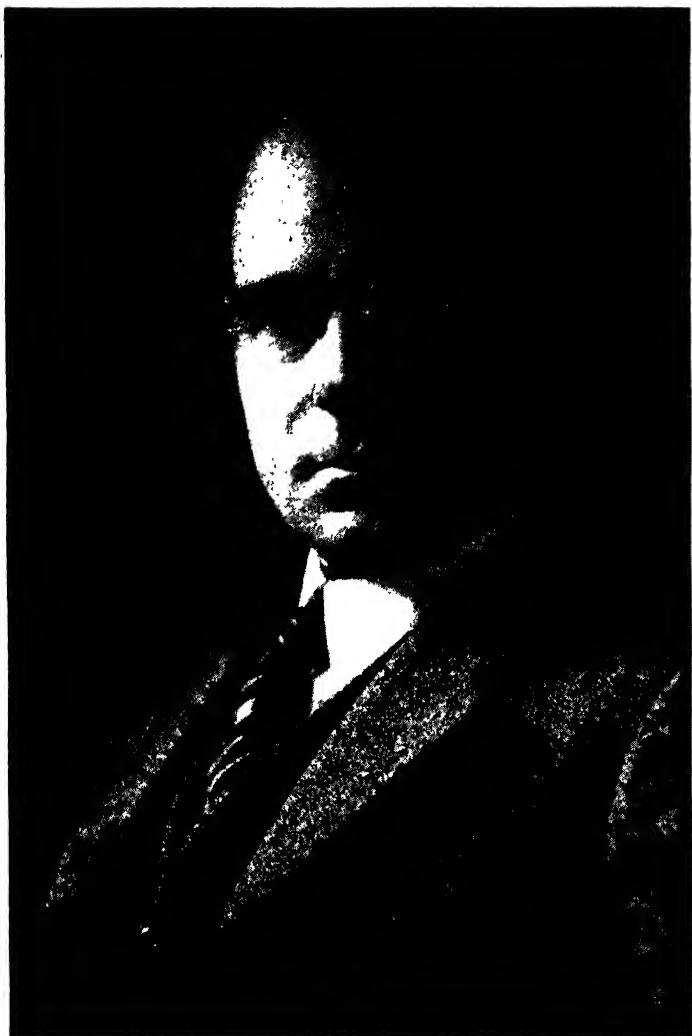
*Bend us Thine ear, O Lord!*

. . . . .  
Behold this maimed and broken thing, dear God; it was an humble black man, who toiled and sweat to save a bit from the pittance paid him. They told him: *Work and Rise*. He worked. Did this man sin? Nay, but some one told how some one said another did—one whom he had never seen nor known. Yet for that man's crime this man lieth maimed and murdered, his wife naked to shame, his children, to poverty and evil.

*Hear us, O heavenly Father!*

. . . . .  
Sit not longer blind, Lord God, deaf to our prayer and dumb to our dumb suffering. Surely Thou, too, art not white, O Lord, a pale, bloodless, heartless thing!

LORD HIGH CHANCELLOR



111

BACHRACH

MORDECAI W. JOHNSON

# LORD HIGH CHANCELLOR

Western civilization, Christianity, decency are struggling for their very lives. In this world-wide civil war, race prejudice is our most dangerous enemy, for it is a disease at the very root of our democratic life.

**T**HE orator spoke slowly and softly. A slight but tough-built man, a handsome, militant figure in bronze, his very quietness accented the violence of his message. Then his voice, edged with scorn, took on a stronger tone, deep and vibrant, as he detailed our Nazi-like treatment of thirteen million darker Americans at the very moment that we were throwing our total resources into the fight against the Nazis abroad.

To advance into the struggle naïvely relying upon the might of our economic and military resources, without attending to the repair of this disease at the root of our evil, is to flirt with Destiny at the risk of the most precious cause in the world. . . . I call upon you to bring about a halt and a healing of this disease while there is yet time.

The hour had been like a minute to the great audience, which sat exhausted, stunned—then stormed into applause. The man's power was uncanny. It was not the sermon nor the logic; it was the magic of his voice and personality. He used speech as a great musician would use a symphony to move the multitude.

Mordecai Johnson had scored another success. Baptist preacher, high-powered orator, president of Howard Uni-



versity, Lord High Chancellor of his race, he was used to success in a career packed with every kind of activity.

Johnson has a favorite saying: "There must be richness and toughness and deepness to life." From boyhood his life has been a balance—sometimes a conflict—of these three qualities.

An only child, petted by his mother, popular with teachers and friends, he learned early the delights of charm. But his hard-driving father drilled him in "habits of order and industry," in "hard work and results." So toughness became both a habit and a goal. And religion, strong and fervent in both his parents, has been a central interest all his life, giving him a deep feeling of reverence for God and man.

Mordecai Johnson was born January 12, 1890, in Paris, Tennessee, a busy mill town and railway junction of about 2500 people. His home, small but neat and clean, with flowers blooming all over the yard, was set between the tracks of the two railroads near where they came together in the factory district. The bustling little town was fascinating to the boy. He loved the puffing, clattering trains, the rough, sweaty workmen trudging to and from the machine shops and planing mills. Every Saturday was a festival. Country people, colored and white, came trooping in from miles around to this county seat to trade, to gossip, and to loaf. As soon as he was able to toddle, Mordecai set up an open air fish fry for the motley horde. He loved this Saturday market, satisfying his thrifty father by the money he brought home, satisfying his own soul by the twin joys of business and festivity.

The conflicting pulls in the boy's life started with his parents. His mother was young, still in her twenties when he was born. She had a skin of burnished copper, a graceful face and figure. A doctor's careless dosing with strong

chemicals had half blinded her, but had not darkened the beauty that glowed in her deep brown eyes. The father, past fifty when the boy was born, had been a slave. His short body showed the stunting of early abuse. But his frame was tough and powerful, and so was his will. He drove the stationary engine at the planing mill twelve hours a day, six days a week, for forty solid years up to just a few days before his death at eighty-five. He drove his son just as hard. And every Sunday he preached at the Mount Zion Baptist Church and sternly directed the religious life of the thousand Negroes in this southern town.

The Reverend Wyatt Johnson was more than a workman and a preacher. He was a driving boss and a high priest and as methodical as a clock. Every morning he rose at four. First he built a fire in the kitchen stove and put on two big kettles of water, one for the household cooking and cleaning, one for his own ritual of bathing. For half an hour he busied himself with tasks outdoors, chopping wood in summer, shoveling snow in winter. Then he filled a big wash tub with water, warming it from his boiling kettle, and slowly bathed and groomed himself, brushing his long hair for a full ten minutes. Clean and burnished, he climbed solemnly to the upper room—a big attic in the four-room frame house—and devoted an exact hour to prayer and meditation. Then he came downstairs, drank a cup of hot water, and, after a long grace, ate breakfast with his family. Before seven he was on his way to the mill where he put in a hard day's work as painstaking and methodical as his home ritual. Reaching home after seven, there was a long, silent supper and long, formal prayers.

After the evening meal the old man sometimes read a little. For while he had never been to school, he had taught himself to read and figure. He had collected a small library

and was counted a man of learning. He talked little. Some evenings he did not even read; he just sat, and after a short time his hard-worked body was ready for bed.

On Sundays the routine was different, but just as exact. After breakfast the father went to the front porch, read his Bible until he found the text he wanted, then sat silently for two or three hours, "collecting his thoughts" and planning his sermon. At ten-thirty he started to the little church that he had organized with his own will and helped to build with his own hands. He spoke with a resonant voice, a peculiar restraint, and a fierce authority, so that he was known all over the countryside as a "mighty powerful preacher." The deacons used to say, "He lays down the word right out of the mouth of God." He never spoke over thirty minutes—unheard-of restraint in the southern rurals, a restraint his son has never learned.

This was a father to respect and fear, but not to love. "I was more than twenty years old," Johnson says, "before I ever talked freely with my father. Now as I look back I can see that he was the banks of my river. It was the stern orderliness and industry I learned from him that has kept me within bounds."

But from his mother came the swift, swirling current that ran between the banks of his river. She loved and cherished her only boy. She stirred him with her ambitions for education and great things. She sang to him and read to him and kept talking about his bright talents.

"The fact was," Mordecai says, "I showed very little talent. I stood at the foot of my classes. I was sickly and so awkward with my hands and with tools that my father said no man would hire me ever unless he wanted a mighty good hinderer."

But his mother kept telling him he was bright and shining. She read him poems and Bible stories: of David, the shepherd

boy who killed a giant with a sling shot, became king of all Israel and loved the beauteous Bathsheba; of Daniel, whose faith stood off all dangers so that he walked unharmed in the den of lions and became a prince in the great Kingdom of Babylon. Most often she told him the story of Mordecai (for whom he was named), member of a race despised and enslaved by the Medes and Persians (as Negroes had been in America), who by his cleverness and the charm of his beautiful niece, Queen Esther, slew his enemies and raised his own people to leadership in this mighty kingdom. It was pleasant to sit and dream of himself as the hero with his mother in place of the beautiful queens.

But there was little danger of his simply lolling in dreams, with his father rousing him at four in the morning to help with the chores and counting off at night all the tasks he had done or failed to do. The father wasted little time in scolding or warning. When a fault was seen or a task not done, the old man reached for a leather strap and walloped the boy fiercely and thoroughly. His mother sometimes took over the task of whipping him, and this was another bond, for Mordecai knew she did it only because she felt the father was too severe.

When he started to school he fell under the guidance of two other people who molded him still further in the twin patterns of charm and hard work. Since he was frail as a youngster, his mother did not send him to the village public school, but put him under the care of Miss Nora Porter, a talented young mulatto who kept a country school two miles out of Paris. Every day he rode out on horseback with this charming young woman, sat adoringly at her feet at school, and spent hours in her parlor, poring over her books and conning his lessons. When Miss Porter took a post in the Paris public school, Mordecai moved with her.

A dashing, driving figure came to this school to supplement

the charm of Miss Porter, as his father supplemented his mother's influence at home. Benjamin Sampson—kicked out as principal of a school in Memphis because he allowed a pupil to write an essay on lynching—became a teacher at Paris. To a reader of Bible stories his name in itself was thrilling. He had the lure of a dangerous man because of having run afoul of the authorities in great Memphis. And he had a wild appearance: a massive head, very black, sunk low in the stooped shoulders of a squat frame.

Sampson was a natural teacher. Under him Mordecai began to work his brains as hard as he worked his body under his father at home. The lad soaked up arithmetic and even algebra. He worked over his problems late into the night until he did them all—or until his father impatiently ordered him to bed. More exciting still, he learned to speak and debate.

Sampson drilled Mordecai in speaking clearly, in rolling out his sentences, in driving home his points. He would write out talks and make the boy learn them and speak them with just the right accent and emphasis. Then he would have him write his own pieces, always keeping his mind not on the sight of the words but on how they would sound in oratory.

He said, "When you speak, pick out one boy in the room and deliver your speech to him. If he is moved, the whole crowd will be moved; if he laughs at your jokes, everybody will be laughing. If he gets bored or looks as if he didn't believe you, stretch out your hand, shake your fist at him, walk down and tower over him, do anything to hold him and make him believe you."

The teacher was so keen on debate that he schooled his pupils to think of all the arguments their opponents might use and have witty or biting answers ready. He was never satisfied with a formal, orderly discussion. He wanted clash,

jokes, even anger if it would add zest and conviction. Under this stalwart, erratic professor, Johnson's schooling bounded ahead. He became known as the "math and debating shark" of the school.

Finished with all the teaching the town had to offer Negroes, he and his mother at once began to plan for high school and college. Professor Sampson recommended him for one of the two scholarships for study elsewhere that had been set up in lieu of higher schooling in Paris. But when he called on the state Senator who had to confirm the award, the Senator said, "I promised that scholarship to Wash Palmer's boy for his father's vote." So, in spite of her bad eyes, his mother took in some more sewing, and from her earnings sent him off to the Baptist high school at Roger Williams University in Nashville. In a few months this school burned down, and he went on to Howe Institute, another Baptist school, in Memphis.

Meanwhile he was learning a good deal that was not in books. One summer he got a job as porter in one of the hotels in Paris. A white clerk at once set out to show the black boy his place and ordered him to take a knife and scrape all the grass from between the bricks in the sidewalk. But the owner stopped that in a hurry, fired the white man, and made Mordecai clerk as well as porter.

"So," he says, "I learned early that some white people were mean and some were fine. I've never had occasion to change my mind on either point."

One of the high spots of his education was working in the school printing shop for part of his keep. He was thrilled by this machinery for setting down ideas and multiplying words. He was fascinated by the exactness of type and the orderly pattern of the printed page. At every chance—even to this day—he loves to set type, to arrange neat lines, to build the patterns of a handsome page. Another job he did well and

happily was taking an old run-down café near the school in Memphis and building it into a clean and popular restaurant.

But most of the time in Nashville and Memphis he was unhappy and lonely. He was still only a boy. He had been petted by his mother and directed in every act by his father. Left to himself, even under the strict routine of these godly schools, he felt lost. He didn't make friends easily with his fellow-students, and he was scared by the rough people and the wicked ways of the big cities. He stuck to studies and typesetting, and in the long evenings when his fellows were out roistering, he sat in his room listening to his phonograph, playing over and over again one of the few classics he and his mother had heard together, Handel's "Largo."

When the time came for him to go to college, his mother was thrilled, the boy was proud, and even the father said nothing—the nearest to praise he ever came. Of course it had to be a Baptist school. So, in the fall of 1906, when he was just sixteen, he entered Morehouse College in Atlanta.

"There," Johnson says, "I was thrown at once under three of the greatest teachers I have ever known: Samuel Archer, Benjamin Brawley, and John Hope."

Under these teachers and with his own growing confidence, he entered on a gala college life. With toughened body and well-drilled mind he quickly became a star in football, baseball, tennis, and debating, and in singing in the glee club and the college chorus. And with all this success, he carried the charm brought out by his doting mother and the fond school teacher of his boyhood. He was soon known as the glamour boy of Morehouse.

But best of all he loved public speaking. The early drill of Professor Sampson put him way ahead of his fellows. The debating team traveled far and wide, and always Johnson was the hero. After a debate at Talladega College, Mrs. Booker

T. Washington was so carried away by Johnson's brilliance that she heaved the young man onto her great shoulders and bore him in triumph from the hall.

In the midst of all the college glamour and success, calamity suddenly swooped down. He was caught playing cards on Sunday and sent home—suspended from school for the rest of the year. For once his mother neither scolded nor comforted him, and it is doubtful if anyone ever dared tell the father what had happened. His mother with tight lips said that he had better go to stay with a relative in Chicago and take God's guidance as to what he did next.

"The day I left home," Johnson says, "I realized I had broken my mother's heart—and that day I became a man."

He resolved that he would go back to college, make up for his failure, and redeem himself before the world and his mother. After a tough time in Chicago, working and studying as he never had before, he re-entered Morehouse in the fall of 1908, made up his lost credits and went on with his class.

He was unwilling to continue to accept help from his mother, and from this time on earned the whole cost of his college living. Happily, he got a job managing the college print shop and so earned his way doing work he loved. He was elected editor of the student paper, picked up many of his old student activities, and made straight "A's" right through the rest of his college course.

His mother came to see him graduate with high honors in 1911, well content at her son's shining recovery from his threatened failure, proud and happy as she saw her dreams for him so fully coming true.

He was at once offered a teaching post at his Alma Mater, to fill the place of one of his heroes, Benjamin Brawley, who was moving to Howard University in Washington. He taught English for two years, then shifted to economics and



history, and was as popular a teacher as he had been a student.

In the midst of his teaching came real tragedy. His mother died. The pleasant, even course of his life was stopped with a sudden jolt. After the funeral he stayed on at home, numb, wrestling with the question of death and life. For the first time he began to talk to his father—to try to understand the driving force in that hard, stern life. He remembered his father's hours of meditation every morning in the upper room. Sitting in a great chair that rocked at the base on springs—his mother's gift—he spent hours in that upper room trying to think out, as his father would, what things meant, what he should do to make his life worth living. As he sat and rocked he saw a vision.

I was lying on my deathbed in a rough cabin. I was alone and the place was very still. Then silently the door opened and people came in, plain people, poorly dressed, who moved in a line past my bed. And as they passed each dropped some word of thanks and love. I had helped one who was sick, I had taught another's son, I had got a job for this one and given wise counsel to that. The line came in and passed out, each person dropping words of thanks while I lay there dying on the coarse bed.

"Before that night was over," Johnson says, "I knew that I had found the meaning of life—service to the poor and needy, service to my race. And I felt that the way to give that service was by entering the ministry."

His friends did not agree with him. They urged him to go on in his career of teacher and scholar where he was sure of success and where he was sorely needed by his race. The strength of their feeling gave Johnson pause. For weeks he debated with himself the pros and cons—preaching or teaching, teaching or preaching. His friends grew irritated by his indecision. The story is that at last the venerable Dr. E. R. Carter, pastor of the Friendship Baptist Church,

snapped impatiently, "Mordecai, if you don't go on and preach the gospel, God's going to take a board to your tail."

Mordecai made his decision. He would be a preacher. On hearing this, W. E. B. Du Bois, who had high respect for learning and none at all for piety, exclaimed, "Another good man gone." A flippant associate jeered "the shining hero goes pious; God's glamour boy." But in spite of doubts and jibes, he prepared himself for the ministry.

One of his friends warned him, "If you are going to preach, stay away from two things, socialism and evolution, for they will ruin your faith." So Johnson at once went to the University of Chicago and enrolled in courses that stressed socialism and evolution. "If my faith was so frail that it could not stand up against knowledge," he says, "I felt the sooner I found it out the better."

After adding a Chicago B.A. to his Morehouse degree, Johnson continued his studies at the Rochester Theological Seminary. Here he found Walter Raushenbush his most inspiring professor. From him he learned to fight social evil as well as to keep his love of man and a reverence for high and holy things. Later he spent a graduate year at Harvard studying the philosophical aspects of religion. At the close of that year, he found himself one of the Harvard commencement speakers. His oratory moved the sophisticated audience of Cambridge just as it had the school and college crowds in the South. Sentences from that speech of more than twenty years ago are timely today.

The Negro people of America have been with us here for three hundred years. They have cut our forests, tilled our fields, built our railroads, fought our battles, and in all of their trials until now they have manifested a simple faith, a grateful heart, a cheerful spirit, and an undivided loyalty to the nation that has been a thing of beauty to behold. Now they have come to the place where their faith

can no longer feed on the stones of repression and violence. They ask for the bread of liberty, of public equality, and public responsibility. It must not be denied them.

Across the seas the darker peoples of the earth are rising from their long sleep and are searching this Western world for light. They are asking: "What can bind this multi-colored world in bonds of brotherhood?"

We of all nations are best prepared to answer that question for we have the world's problem of race relationships here in crucible, and by strength of our American faith we have made some encouraging progress in its solution. If the fires of this faith are kept burning around that crucible, what comes out of it may place these United States in the spiritual leadership of all humanity.

When the Negro cries with pain from his deep hurt and lays his petition for elemental justice before the nation, he is calling upon the American people to kindle anew, about the crucible of race relationships, the fires of American faith.

While at Rochester he served as student pastor of the Baptist church in near-by Mumfords. Finding this the only church in a town where there were many Negroes of other denominations, he did a bold thing: he opened the church to Methodists, Presbyterians, Campbellites, members of any sect, to come in as associate members without giving up loyalty to their own church.

Graduated from Rochester, he was offered a post in the international work of the Y.M.C.A. in place of Max Yergan who had just been called to India. Johnson accepted this as a stopgap, though he meant that nothing should lure him away from active preaching. When he went to the Y.M.C.A. staff conference in Atlantic City, he found the Negro members barred from eating and sleeping in the hotel where the meetings were held. He resigned at once. He didn't see how this organization could hope to carry out its program of

bringing the whole world to Christianity if it could not carry out the central teachings of Jesus in its home country. Called at a later time to speak before the Student Volunteer Movement for Foreign Missionaries, he gave a biting analysis of conditions at home, under the title: "Shall We Send Missionaries from Non-Christian America?"

In 1917 he was called to the pastorate of the First Baptist Church of Charleston, West Virginia, where he stayed for nine years, gloriously happy in the work that he felt was the culmination of all his mother and his father and his God would want him to do. He became a force in the Baptist church throughout the state. One of his special services was to put finances on a sound basis both in his own church and in the state-wide organization. Most of all he enjoyed the preaching, which he did eloquently and movingly.

Over and over his sermons stressed his three great articles of faith: the brotherhood of man; the need for unity as contrasted to sectarianism in the Christian movement; social reform in order to bring the Kingdom of God to this world. While Doctor Johnson always speaks without notes, sentences taken down during his preaching give some flavor of his sermons.

The time is past when Christians in America can take a long spoon and hand the gospel to the black man out the back door.

We Christians do such strange things. In a single church two meetings were held just two weeks apart. One was to bless a missionary starting to Africa. This one preacher and his wife are expected by the power and spirit of Jesus not to be overwhelmed by two million black people in their province, but to lift up the whole community. Two weeks afterward, the congregation was called to the same church to protest the moving into the neighborhood of a colored man and his family and to find ways to drive them out. We

send one white man and his wife to convert two million Negroes in Africa, and 600 Christians run from one Negro and his wife in America!

In our sectarian contests we are very proud if one preacher can get a donation of \$5000 from some rich man to build a new church. What should happen is this. All the ministers of all denominations—Baptists, Methodists, Presbyterians, Catholics—should say to that rich man: "Put forth your riches and your resources to launch a program that will relieve unemployment and give the people of our community a decent chance to make a living in a self-respecting way."

There must be a great united movement of the Christian churches given to the realistic purpose of transforming the real world, with its green grass and its fallible human beings and its injuriously working social institutions, into the Kingdom of God on Earth. If the church is to live there must be a Christian movement to give reverence to human personality, a movement to use all the forces of modern knowledge and technology to build a social order which will raise and enlarge the life of every human being.

But Johnson did more than preach. He gave point to his sermons by plunging into the practical work of social reform. He organized a branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. He set up a co-operative grocery store for Negroes. He treated his church not as a thing apart, but as the center of the whole life of the community.

The turning point in Mordecai Johnson's career came in 1926. He was elected head of Howard University as its first Negro president. This was a call he could not refuse. He longed to stay in active preaching. But he knew that Howard offered the finest chance in America to influence the spiritual as well as the intellectual growth of the colored people.

Ever since, Howard University has been Doctor Johnson's life.

The university that he has been building with abounding energy, amid a welter of bitter criticism, is a unique and exciting place. It is the only national university in the United States in the sense of being supported by federal funds voted directly by Congress. It is also a co-operative effort in which private gifts supplement government grants and private citizens serve on a self-perpetuating board as public trustees. It is the capstone of the series of institutions for the education of Negroes in America.

Howard was founded just after the Civil War by the joint efforts of church boards and the United States Government. The chief sponsor was the Freedmen's Bureau, set up by Act of Congress on March 3, 1865, as protector of the recently freed slaves and as "national custodian of the chaos resulting from emancipation and the War."

Howard had the prayerful origin common to so many of the Negro colleges. At a meeting in the First Congregational Church of Washington, General O. O. Howard, director of the Freedmen's Bureau, talked of visions of a great educational center for Negroes at the nation's capital. After many meetings and much busy planning, a normal school was opened on May 2, 1867, in an abandoned dance hall and beer saloon at the edge of Washington. A college preparatory department and a medical school were soon added—all occupying this old dance hall, which also served as dormitory for the faculty. The medical school, however, had to move its dissecting rooms to a woodshed in the rear when it came to the horrified attention of the teachers that they were living under the same roof with cadavers. The College of Liberal Arts also had its start in the old cabaret—modest and profane quarters for the beginnings of a great university.

Howard was a new kind of institution. It took all sorts of students. Black and white, young and old, married and single, educated and ignorant—all could enter with or without money. Many, finding it impossible to believe the good news, applied asking if it were true that Negroes were admitted. Of the first five students, four were young white women. Married men asked to enter with their wives. Poor white boys came from Louisiana and advanced students came down from Oberlin College in Ohio. Pupils brought with them pick or shovel or spade, prepared literally to dig their way through school. These early students prepared the new land on which the University was to grow, drained and graded the hill, and laid out the surrounding streets which now are avenues of the nation's capital.

During the early years the institution flourished. Funds from the government and from church boards poured in lavishly for a rapid expansion. Then came evil days. The friendly Bureau was closed out by Congress, and, with the financial panic of 1873, individual and church support dried up. The University, which had swelled into a dozen sprawling departments, began to flounder. By 1875 it had a debt of \$100,000. To avoid bankruptcy the programs were cut sharply, the faculties were reorganized, and a vigorous campaign for funds was launched. Congress, petitioned to take up again the support it had abandoned with the closing of the Freedmen's Bureau, made an appropriation of \$10,000 in 1879 and has continued support in steadily growing sums from that time to this. The school regained some of its prestige and, by the early decades of this century, was becoming the most important institution of higher learning for Negroes. But politics, internal strife, and poverty hampered sound growth and kept it from high distinction. Under the leadership of Mordecai Johnson the University again has shot ahead.

It is hard to appraise Doctor Johnson's influence as Lord High Chancellor of this most important Negro institution. He has been one of the turbulent storm centers of Negro education and Negro life for nearly twenty years. Friends and enemies engage in such violent language that it is almost impossible to form any calm and balanced opinion.

Certainly he has greatly enlarged the plant and funds. With private gifts of over a million dollars, he quietly bought up acres of land adjoining the campus and so provided living space for the growing institution. With a series of special appropriations from Congress, totaling four million dollars, he built a great central library, new buildings for class rooms, science laboratories, a new medical school, four new dormitories, and a central power plant. Meanwhile, from foundations and individuals he raised two million dollars for endowment and special projects.

Early in his administration, in consultation with eminent educators and members of Congress, he drew up a Twenty-Year Plan for the steady development of the University and obtained an amendment to the original act of incorporation so that appropriations were no longer subject to the whims of Congress but were given a regular place among government departments in the annual federal budget. From 1926 to 1943 the plant and endowment of Howard University expanded from two million to almost eight million dollars, and the annual budget from \$700,000 to over one and a half million.

It is on the educational side of the program that the quarrels rage. Many of the criticisms come from eminent people and are backed by instances of behavior that appear far from democratic or enlightened. A whole issue of the Howard University Alumni Journal in 1937 was devoted to "The Case Against Mordecai Johnson." Yet actual recorded progress at Howard has been steadily toward high standards and



sound scholarship. Here are some specific criticisms set against definite accomplishments:

Johnson came to Howard University without any previous experience in college or university administration, but with the reputation of being an orator and a successful Baptist preacher. He possessed all of the weaknesses of both with none of the virtues. As an administrator he is the worst imaginable and as an educator he is an ignoramus.\*

Yet when President Johnson came to Howard in 1926 he found not one of the sprawling departments recognized as first-rate by national standards, and found half the teaching staff on a part-time basis. He has increased the full-time faculty from 80 to 160, and today only 12 per cent of the teaching is done by part-time instructors—and that largely in the professional schools where the experience of practicing doctors and lawyers is an asset to their teaching. One by one over the years from 1930 to 1940, every school of the University was thoroughly reorganized and formally approved by the national accrediting associations. Today 46 per cent of the faculty of liberal arts hold doctoral degrees. The enrollment in the Graduate School during the first decade of Doctor Johnson's administration jumped from 43 to 407.

The President is a slave driver, impatient of leisure or any of the finer aspects of scholarship and the arts.

Yet during Johnson's administration faculty salaries have been doubled and the routine teaching load has been cut in half. He has fostered music, arts, and literature, has built research wealth in libraries and laboratories, has stimulated scholarly output in books and journals supported by the University.

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\* These and all following quotations are from "The Case Against Mordecai Johnson," or from letters in the possession of the author.

Johnson is a vain and thin-skinned tyrant, brooking no interference from his cowering faculty.

Yet one of the notable achievements of his administration is the establishment of security in the form of permanent tenure of office for the professors, and regular formal procedure for faculty participation in the policies and practices of the institution.

It is hard to reconcile the bitter criticism of alumni and former teachers with the record of overt achievements. Maybe, as was said of Woodrow Wilson, he holds to high standards and noble ideals, yet is cold and inept in dealing with his individual associates. And it must be remembered that in reorganizing departments and building the faculty, he has had to do ruthless cutting and smashing.

It is the custom in America to regard university presidents as fair game for public attack, especially if they are carrying out sweeping reforms. Certainly criticism and vituperation poured over Charles Eliot as he was transforming Harvard from a provincial New England finishing school to the greatest of American universities, and over William Rainey Harper as he was building the University of Chicago from a little Baptist school into the first high seat of learning in the Midwest. It is fair to mention Mordecai Johnson in this select company. While he has worked within narrower limits, he has transformed Howard from a chaos of second-rate and loosely joined departments into a great university.

In spite of the charges of tyranny, he has stood for independent thought and free speech as few university presidents have dared to do. Professors in the Howard Law School have defended many important and unpopular cases of civil rights. When members of the United States Congress—on which Howard depends for its budget—were demanding

the head of a radical professor, Johnson answered, much as Voltaire did many years ago: "The man is a distinguished scholar, in every way qualified for the faculty of any university. I disagree with his opinions, but I will stake my position on defending his right to express them."

Amid all his busyness, amid all the criticism and acclaim, Doctor Johnson spends a great deal of quiet and happy time in his home. On Christmas Day of 1916, just before he took the pastorate in West Virginia, he married Anna Ethelyn Gardner who had been a pupil in one of his classes while he was a teacher at Morehouse College and she was a student at the near-by Spelman Seminary. In her he found much of his mother's charm and his father's thoroughness. They have two daughters and three sons, ranging in age from eleven to twenty-four. In their well-run house Doctor Johnson rules with much of the stern force of his own hard-driving father.

In Washington Mrs. Johnson graciously presides over the President's House at the edge of the Howard campus. In summers the family retreat to their place in Virginia, in a valley of the Potomac swung between two mountains, within a stone's throw of Harper's Ferry. There for two months each year they live a simple country life. In the home Mordecai Johnson spends much time, as his father used to do, in reading, preparing his sermons, planning and thinking.

In spite of the demands of a great university, Doctor Johnson still loves to preach, and his fervent voice continues to be heard from Boston to Los Angeles, from Chicago to New Orleans. Other than oratory he has few diversions.

His wife says that he "runs out to meet problems with open arms." After grappling with the heavy issues of the University, after long preaching and speaking trips all over the country, he runs with equally open arms to the quiet joys of

family life. To a degree far above most men, he has found in his work and his home that combination that he loves: richness and toughness and deepness in life.



# MUSIC MAKER



**WILLIAM GRANT STILL**  
**FROM A PORTRAIT BY THOMAS CRAIG**

# MUSIC MAKER

ON A spring afternoon, cool and brightly sun kissed as a Southern California poster, I called on William Grant Still. Four or five miles from the business center of Los Angeles, out toward Hollywood, is a new section of Negro homes: modest bungalows with tiny lawns and gardens. As I came to the high wire gate of one of these pleasant homes, a slight, bronzed man hurried out to greet me. A dog bounding and barking at one side and a three-year-old boy tugging and babbling at the other gave the man a somewhat distracted air. His wavy hair blowing loose in the wind, his slacks flapping about his legs, his shushing of boy and dog in tones that showed no hope of being obeyed, my host seemed more like an absent-minded professor or an amateur gardener than the picture in my mind of how one of the most talented of modern composers should look. We walked into his living room and, to the homely din of dog and boy and dishes rattling in the kitchen, we began to talk of music and Negroes, of radio and people, and the fresh brave world that America almost is.

All that afternoon and evening and most of the next day we visited, smoking and lounging in the well-worn leather chairs of the wide living room, eating in the snug dining nook, wandering in the cool of the evening in the kitchen garden gay with flowers and vegetables and tropical fruits that Still loves to plant and tend. He took me into his studio, a large room completely cut off from the rest of the house, where he works steadily every day. The grand piano, which dominates the room, was surrounded by radio, phonograph,



and assorted gadgets. My eye, unused to the equipment of a composer's workshop, was struck by musical scores lying about in every state of progress from a few notes hastily jotted down to carefully stacked series of sheets marking the score of every instrument in a full orchestral symphony. Desks and cabinets, fashioned by the composer's own hands, stood about the walls and, near the piano, a fascinating contraption that Still uses to write his musical scores—a typewriter with notes and dots and rests in place of letters.

While we visited, Mrs. Still divided her time between household tasks, tending their son and his baby sister, and joining in our talk. A Russian Jewish musician and a well-known music critic, she is also “lady of all work” in the Still home. It was her hand that cooked and served our suppers and kept some order in our visiting. She was ready with facts and dates when Still could not remember them, clearly adoring her quiet husband, yet fussing a bit too, as any competent wife must who is married to so easygoing a genius. Still confessed to me that on the morning of his wedding day he drove his car so absent-mindedly that he was hailed into court and fined \$20. Of course he did not have that much money with him, so his promised bride, who didn't have it either, had to scurry around among his friends to bail him out before she could marry him.

As I walked with the family on an errand to a neighbor's house, my eyes were dazzled by the grand Moorish palace of Rochester, the radio star, shooting to the sky above the bungalows of this modest Negro section, glistening in the best Hollywood style with white plaster walls, ornate statues, and a luxurious swimming pool. The Stills apologized that they were not able to take me in and introduce me. They had never met him. “Rochester lives in a different world,” they said. “He's a big shot.”

While we wandered a good deal in our talking as well as

in our walks, the purpose of my visit was to get the story of the life of this eminent American composer.

If music is "in the blood," it was born in William Grant Still. The rhythm of the African tom-tom, the throb of the Indian war dance, the lilt of Irish folk music, are mingled almost equally in his veins. For, like so many Brown Americans, he is the child of all three of the major racial stocks: black, white, and yellow-brown.

He was born May 11, 1895, in Woodville, Mississippi, a little town near the river just north of the Louisiana border. His father had played a cornet, had led the village band, and had even tried his hand at writing music. And in the background of the home was a grandmother's deep love of rhythm and her constant singing of hymns and spirituals. But his mother was a school teacher, and sound education for her son was one of the goals of her career. The boy's life was balanced rather than torn between the rigors of book learning and the joys of expression.

While born and raised in the Deep South, Billy Still was by no means the poor and simple country pickaninny of southern song and story. He grew up in a well-kept middle-class home. Both his parents were college graduates who had met while they were teaching at the Alabama State College at Huntsville. And his ancestry tied him to varied and prominent families. One grandfather of each of his parents had been Irish: one an overseer and one a rich planter. Grandmothers on each side had Cherokee blood. His mother's father was a Spanish landowner in Florida. There was so little of Africa on either side of the family that his father, with straight black hair and clear-cut features, passed for white anywhere he pleased, and his mother, equally white but with brown eyes and dark wavy hair, looked like a Castilian. Billy remembers as a boy the mysterious trips his mother would make every year or so to her Spanish relatives

in Florida, and her fondness for being called "madre" rather than "mama."

The boy's home was marked by thrift. Billy says that to this day he has a passion for paying bills promptly, for as a small boy he was often allowed to carry the cash to the grocer to pay the weekly account—and always got a sack of candy with the receipt. His father, in addition to teaching, kept a successful general store, and at his early death in 1895, the year Billy was born, left a tiny estate which, carefully invested by his mother, provided a small allowance to the lad during his school and college years.

After his father's death, his mother took the boy to live with her sister and mother in Little Rock, Arkansas. There she taught in the public schools and, in the course of time, became instructor in literature in the excellent Negro high school of Little Rock. Five years after his father's death, his mother married Charles Shepperson, a railway postal clerk. This was a happy union for Billy as well as for his mother, for it gave him a sympathetic stepfather and a comfortable, stable home. The stepfather early endeared himself to his new son by letting him come along on thrilling trips to Coffeerville, Kansas, the other end of the railway run. The boy eagerly watched the busy efficiency of mail sorting in the postal car. And in Coffeerville, holding tight to his stepfather's hand, he would walk about the streets of this bustling, raw railway center, visiting the glass factory, sitting in the courthouse while horse thieves were being tried, viewing in awe the bullet holes in the bank, left from the raids of the Dalton boys.

As he grew up in Mississippi and Arkansas, the boy doubtless ran into slights on account of his race. But these did not impress him much; certainly they did not make him bitter. He remembers a happy childhood with comfort and a good deal of strictness. One of his keenest trials was that he had

to attend classes taught by his mother, and she was a stern taskmaster. His playmates used to say in sympathy, "I'm glad my mother doesn't teach here." While fond of open-air play, he wasn't keen on competitive sports. He had the usual boy's interest in reading and about the average boy's taste: the Rollo stories, Horatio Alger, the Count of Monte Cristo.

Most of all he loved to make things with his hands: wooden toys, electric gadgets, chemical stinks. And from early days he took a special joy in making music. As a boy he whittled out a fiddle and made such horrid noises on it that his stepfather bought him a good violin and got him a teacher. While he was not a musical prodigy, the music in his home and his general creativeness made it natural for him to delight in "fiddling with" tone and rhythm as well as wood and metal.

No sooner did he learn to read notes than he wanted to write them. He ruled out musical scores on scratch pads and jotted down melodies which he gleefully carried to school, and made his chums play with him in little orchestras that they got together. He studied and dreamed of ways to put his feelings into song and symphony. Fortunately, his stepfather loved music too and, as a well-paid postal clerk, could indulge his taste. When Billy was in his early teens a phonograph suddenly appeared in the home, followed by a steady stream of Red Seal records. From this magic box came pouring out the sonorous chants and harmonies that up to this time had been simply gropings in the boy's soul.

But his mother, bound that Billy should not be just a triflin' fiddler, kept him diligently at school and finally sent him to Wilberforce University, a Negro mission school just north of the Ohio River. To make sure there would be no nonsense, she entered him in the science course.

The Wilberforce years—as is so often true of American

college life—were full of gropings: a time both of maturing and of rebellion and frivolity. Wilberforce at that time was "swelled with piety and low scholarship." Young Still didn't like it, and as a result spent much of his time getting into mischief. He was the ringleader of a gang that went climbing around houses stealing pies from the upper window sills where they had been set to cool. He and his friends discovered that by poking warmed sticks into chicken roosts the hens would be attracted by the warmth and slowly walk out on the poles and into the boys' hands. Once they half undressed a student dandy, tied him up, and laid him on the steps of the girls' dormitory.

Still's chief escape from the dullness of college was music. He dutifully did his chemistry and physics and has ever been thankful for learning the "stern rhythms of mathematics." But music now became his passion. He played his violin in the student string quartet, and learned the oboe and clarinet and then the piccolo and baritone horn for the college band. Soon he was leading all these groups and arranging music for them. He was never satisfied with the quality of his violin playing, far from content with his musical arrangements. He kept lying awake long into the night trying to figure out how to develop and write down musical ideas.

He happened onto the poetry of Paul Laurence Dunbar, was charmed by its soft dialect and melodious rhythms, and began to take an interest in his African background. In boyish worship of Coleridge-Taylor, the English Negro composer, he set out to imitate him in every way, in dress and looks as well as in creativeness. But when he found he could not make his own Irish-Indian hair stand up in a high African tuft like his idol's, he decided that he would become greater than Coleridge-Taylor and wear his hair in his own way.

He went home in the summer after his freshman year, determined (a) to go to Oberlin College, which had a good

music department and a tradition of hospitality to Negroes, and (b) to become at once a great musical composer. He failed in both. The music which he composed furiously and sent off to national competitions all came back, sometimes with polite, cool notes saying the judges could not make out what he was driving at. And his mother wouldn't listen to Oberlin. She did not like his music making and did not want to coddle this queer bent in her son. For all her care and kindness, this mother was a strict puritan. She was even a purist in speech: "trousers," never "pants"—precise and grammatical sentences, not sloppy slang. Most of all, she wanted her boy to be respectable, "to make something of himself," and she feared music and musicians. Fiddlers were low life. Even great musicians were libertines. During this summer she tried to distract her son with girls, in whom he didn't yet take much interest. His mother knew that girls might be dangerous, but music was much worse. Anyway, in the fall she bundled the boy back to the pious and unmusical Wilberforce.

The next three years were pretty dismal. He kept leading the musical clubs and writing the scores for almost every piece they played. He kept trying to compose, and at college gave one full-dress concert of his own writings. He studied enough to pass all his courses, though his textbooks were scribbled with notes and musical scores. But college was dull. He continued his pranks, and little by little got the blame for all the devilry there was. Girls began to pester him, too, with their attentions and lures and giggles.

Finally girl and prank combined in college tragedy. He and some other boys walked with their girls out of college bounds. Only a person who went to a strict co-educational college a generation ago can realize the horror of the deans at the crime of taking a girl beyond the walking limits. In this case there seems to have been a plot, for members of the

faculty were hidden in the woods and surprised the offenders the minute they got onto forbidden ground. The college rocked with the scandal. The whole group at once left school to avoid being expelled. Thus Still quit Wilberforce just two months before graduation. And with a deep sense of guilt, he married the girl who had got up the party and had walked with him on the gaudy jaunt.

After twenty years of comfortable and sheltered youth he was suddenly shoved into the world, with a college scandal, an outraged mother, and a hasty marriage. "It was hard and bitter," he says, "but it was high time I was thrown on my own and began to learn life." From then on he learned it the hard way. He took any odd jobs he could get, played in bands when he could, served as mess boy in the Navy, scrimped, worried himself thin, but kept trying to find a way to crash the business of making music and getting paid for it.

In the course of these struggling years he ran into W. C. Handy, "the father of the blues," one of the most original of all Negro musicians. Handy, who had just started a music publishing venture in Memphis, gave him a job in his office by day and in his orchestra by night. To this day Still feels a special gratitude to Handy not only for this early help but for "his generosity and support which have never wavered nor shown pettiness or jealousy in all my musical career." But Still hated the sordid café life in Memphis and in the many southern towns that the band visited in its famous tours. He found that his mother was right in thinking this kind of musicking was low life. Meanwhile, his marriage was about as ragged and unhappy as it could be.

After five or six years of grubbing and minstrelsy, he decided to plunge, to realize his early ambition of studying at the Oberlin Conservatory of Music. He put in a hard and fruitful year at Oberlin, and then rejoined his friend W. C. Handy, who had moved to New York, and took up orchestra

playing on a higher scale. He was cellist in the crack bands at the Plantation Night Club, played with Eubie Blake's orchestra for the epoch-making *Shuffle Along*, and was a popular fixture at many other clubs and shows.

Yet he kept wanting to learn, and most of all he wanted to learn how to compose as well as play. As he began to earn good money in New York, he decided he could afford to enter the New England Conservatory of Music. But George W. Chadwick, in spite of Still's protests, insisted on teaching for nothing this young man in whom he recognized "clear promise of genius."

Next he began composing under the guidance of Edgar Varese, the modernist, "who pointed the way to individual expression." Varese's influence on Still was so strong that many of his works of this period were dubbed "pure cacophony," "stunt writing," "peculiar noises without rhythm or meaning." Still felt that "some critics seem to think I write music only to annoy them," though he himself later called one of his feats "a musical portrait of an owl with a headache."

By 1926, at the age of thirty, he had come to maturity. He had played every kind of instrument in every kind of band, in theaters, night clubs, and touring troupes. He had thorough grounding in harmony and musical theory. He had twelve years of experience in arranging and in struggles to compose in many forms, ranging all the way from classic symphonies to jazz and "modern." He decided to write from then on neither as a conceited individualist nor as a slave to old patterns, but as a modern American building on the musical heritage of classic Europe and on the feeling of his own Negro-American background. For the past fifteen years William Grant Still has followed that sound resolve and during that whole period he has been contributing beautiful—often great—offerings to America's musical wealth.



His music is better known than he is. Many people who have enjoyed his songs and symphonies have no idea that the composer is a Negro.

"Levee Land," written for the beautiful brown singer Florence Mills, "Winter's Approach," to words by Paul Laurence Dunbar, and "Breath of a Rose," to a poem by Langston Hughes, are among his best-known songs. "Sahdji" and "La Duiabesse" (the she-devil) are brilliant ballets. "The Black Man Dances," "Three Visions," and the beautiful and original "Kaintuck," are rated highest among his pieces for the piano.

A great composer stands or falls by his full-length symphonies and operas, and here Still has shown his highest gifts. Best known of his symphonies is a trilogy composed over a period of nearly a decade: *Africa*, *Afro-American Symphony*, and *Symphony in G Minor*, subtitled "Song of a New Race" at the earnest request of Leopold Stokowski who places Still among the American composers whose work he most likes to conduct. Each of these symphonies is deeply rooted in American Negro motifs and feeling. During five years Still scored four different versions of *Africa*. In 1933 came the fifth and "final" version—only to be rewritten in 1935 when he found a "fault" and discovered a truer way of expressing his meaning.

This inspiration in writing and painstaking care in revision are characteristic. Many compositions he has destroyed completely because "they weren't good enough." He detests cheap effects and loathes overwriting and long-windedness. His constant struggle is to express his feeling with perfection of rhythm and harmony and without one extra note or tone. As a result critics write of many of his symphonies: "There is not a cheap or banal passage in the entire composition," "the most direct appeal," "honest, sincere music."

Of his operas the best known is *Blue Steel*. The scene is

laid in a mythical swamp and the actors are a Negro from Birmingham (Blue Steel), a young voodoo girl (Neola), a priestess and a high priest of the cult. In this setting Still is able to use Negro themes and Negro folklore to the full and to bring the whole to a high dramatic climax in the struggle between the modern lilting love of Blue Steel and Neola and the pull and power of the chants and drums of voodoo. The opera, *Troubled Island*, based on Haitian history, is even more powerful, and is among the best things he has done so far. Most recent works are *A Bayou Legend* and a short simple opera of American life called *A Southern Interlude*.

Still has not held himself entirely to large and formal types of music. He has arranged many Negro spirituals with such feeling for their native meaning that they have become creations of depth and beauty. One of his earlier works is full of the love of pranks of his schoolboy days: *From the Black Belt*, written for small orchestra and composed frankly "to please those who like it." The first section of this work, "Lil' Scamp," runs but eight measures, is intended to provoke laughter, and always does. The names of the other sections indicate their purpose and mood: "Honeysuckle," a slightly ironic treatment of the too-sweet southern setting; "Dance, Mah Bones Is Creaking," the antics of a humorous old Negro character; "Blue," a plaintive melody in the mood of the blues songs; "Brown Girl," tone poetry of a lovely mulatto; "Clap Yo' Han's," a rollicking clapping dance of pickaninnies that ends the gay "little symphony."

One of the most interesting of Still's works is *Lenox Avenue*, a series of ten orchestral episodes for orchestra, chorus, and announcer, written directly for the radio. Based on life in modern Harlem, this "wireless symphony" has made history for the radio, has a high place in concert music, and has been made into one of the most typical of American ballets.

Two of his recent works are glorified ballads, both to

words by Katherine Garrison Chapin (Mrs. Francis Biddle): "And They Lynched Him on a Tree," scored for orchestra, white chorus, Negro chorus, contralto solo and narrator, and "Plain-Chant for America," for baritone and orchestra, a call to the freedom that belongs to all men in the New World.

Now in his middle forties, living in his comfortable home in Los Angeles, Still is giving his full time to the life of a creative musician. An early riser, he gives five hours every morning to composing, and most afternoons and many evenings to the more routine work of revising and scoring. On occasion he conducts orchestras in the playing of his symphonies, and he regularly directs the works that he has composed for radio.

His career baffles many of his friends and relatives. An aunt visiting recently asked, "Billy, what do you do?" "I compose music," he answered. "Yes, I know," she said, "but what do you do? Haven't you any work?"

His first marriage ended when his wife deserted him in 1932. Maybe the failure in this marriage was not all her fault. It was just that these two people had too little in common, lived in separate worlds, had small appreciation of each other's ideas and ideals. Anyway, when she went sailing off Still cried, "I've finally begun to live."

In 1939 he married Verna Arvey, moved into his present house, which he has been gradually paying for ever since, and settled into steady writing and quiet domesticity. His wife is often at the piano at his concerts, has written the words for several of his works. With his wife puttering about, love and pride glowing in her eyes, and with his two children contentedly climbing over him, this man is truly at home.

While on easy terms with a few of his neighbors, Still is a good deal of a recluse. The high wire fence about his place

is to shield his own privacy as much as to protect his garden. He isn't a member of any lodges and has no use for big meetings or night clubs. He doesn't even go to church any more, though he has a deeply reverent feeling about God and a mystical attitude toward his music as a sacred mission for expressing and interpreting the beauty and rhythm of God's universe.

But it would be a mistake to picture this man as a dreamy musician without interest in the world about him. He reads carefully both news and current literature. And he loves to spend hours with his wife and friends in keen analysis of the war and the progress back and forth of liberalism and democracy. He has high standards in personal and racial conduct. When in 1943 a film of Negro life, for which he was writing the music, was cheapened to the Hollywood pattern of "darky antics," he threw up the best-paying contract he ever had. With a stinging rebuke that echoed across the continent, he flatly refused to sell his talent in any such market.

Yet he is not preoccupied by "the race problem." This is not an acute question to a man of his interests and habits. "I can't see that I've run into much unfairness because of my brown color," he says. "I think I've had as many breaks as any white composer." When he took part recently in a bi-racial forum, his neighbors criticized him because he did not rail at race prejudice. The nearest to bitterness he shows is at the obsession of American musicians and audiences for the ancient classics. "A lot of those old Europeans," he claims, "are long-winded and dull. Yet they fill the programs. It is cruelly hard for modern composers to get a hearing."

William Grant Still has won almost every honor open to musicians. Wilberforce University, reversing its earlier judgment, has eagerly enrolled him among its graduates, with an honorary degree in 1936, and Howard University has given

him a similar honor. He has held Guggenheim and Rosenwald fellowships in composition and the Harmon award for contributions to American culture. As a kind of musical poet laureate, he has written the music for many national festivals. He is a member of national and international associations of composers, and receives a part of his income from radio royalties as a member of the organization popularly known as ASCAP.

He is acclaimed equally for songs, choral compositions, pieces for small orchestras, radio music, operas, and symphonies. Popular with both classicists and modernists, he has been named by Howard Hanson as one of the four leading composers living in America today. He is truly creative, for into the rich musical forms of classic Europe he pours the fresh feeling of Negroes and the New World.

SAINT PHILIP OF THE  
PULLMAN PORTERS



GORDON PARKS, O.W.I.

A. PHILIP RANDOLPH

# SAINT PHILIP OF THE PULLMAN PORTERS

ON THE third floor of a big building on 125th Street just off Seventh Avenue in New York City is the office of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters. To a caller coming into the small outer office, a slim brown girl behind the information window says, "Mr. Randolph will see you just as soon as he can."

The visitor takes his place on a bench. As he waits, he sees through a side door groups of porters playing card games and hears from further back the light crack of pool or billiard balls. His eye roams over placards on the walls: a huge map of the United States dotted with population and employment figures, with the slogan, "America—A Nation of One People from Many Countries"; a bulletin board with notices about sick members of the Brotherhood, a double-page spread from the newspaper *PM* with a staring headline about the Fair Employment Practice Committee.

After the wait has dragged almost to the breaking point, the visitor is ushered through a door marked "Executive Board—Private" into a large, well-lighted room furnished with dark green leather chairs and a heavy mahogany table. Another wait, and into the room steps a tall, handsome, brown-black man, carefully dressed in a light brown suit—A. Philip Randolph.

The man's greeting is cordial but formal. He is calm and earnest, but unresponsive to efforts to set up any easy exchange of talk. While he looks into his caller's face, his eyes seem focused on far-distant space. He speaks ponderously of



general matters, complains eloquently of "the wrongs of Negroes and all downtrodden people." His vibrant voice rumbles through the room, as if a vast audience were always in the background. But it is hard to get him to give details about himself.

A. Philip Randolph has become a public figure. Masses of Negroes already think of him as a saint. He is often called an American Gandhi. From his present brooding and planning may come only futility—the fate of so many mystics. Or he may become the great prophet and leader of his people.

Certainly he has captured the people's imagination. And he has won results that justify admiration. For twenty-five years he has fought for Negro workers and the common man. As organizer and president of the Pullman porters union, he waged the pioneer battle of Negro labor. The victory he won for that union, after bitter years that would have crushed a less tough and dogged man, is the cornerstone of the present upsurge of the workers of the darker tenth of America's people. And he has thrilled the colored masses with his "March on Washington Movement" and his demands for absolute justice and equality.

There is little one can learn about Randolph's childhood and rearing that seems to account either for the persistence-to-victory of his labor fights, or for the strange, stern absolutism that marks him today.

He was born April 15, 1889, in Crescent City, Florida. His father, black, possibly pure African, was an itinerant Methodist preacher who served circuits of three or four scattered churches always made up of the poorest Negroes. The father had little formal education, but he had schooled himself. He read avidly, if narrowly—the Bible, sermons, pious tracts—and kept a sizable collection of books in his home. His mother was a light mulatto, the daughter of a respected lumber dealer who was so white that strangers

did not take him for a Negro, so proud that no one dared offend him. He carried a gun stuck in his belt as a warning to triflers. "I always thought of my grandfather as a great man," Randolph says. "I admired my mother too, not only for her beauty but for her strength of character."

A strong influence in his life seems to have been a brother, two years older than Philip, the only other child in the family. He talks a great deal of this brother. "We were always together as boys," he says. "I loved my brother very much. I admired him. We had a friendship which lasted to his death [in 1928], a friendship which I miss terribly even now. A day never passes in which I do not feel a need of him."

From early childhood, Philip and his brother worked at all kinds of jobs to eke out the family income: clerking in stores, running errands, selling papers. And as they grew older, they took on heavy labor: shoveling dirt, loading flat cars with sand, laying cross ties and rails.

In between jobs, the boys went to public school and in the course of time on to high school at Cookman Institute in Jacksonville, the same school which later merged with Mrs. Bethune's institution to become Bethune-Cookman College.

Philip seems to take pride in the fact that his brother was brighter than he in everything. "My brother was a brilliant student," he says, "but I didn't make a particularly good record. My brother was especially good in Latin. He liked to tackle books and problems in mathematics far beyond his age and grade. He liked poetry too. I remember he used to read Spenser. He liked Shelley and Keats and Wordsworth. He sometimes wrote poems of his own."

Even if he was not as bright as his brother, Philip seems to have been a diligent student. In addition to the stiff "classical course" of his high school, he read a good deal at home—the tracts and sermons of his father's library. One of his delights

as a boy was to read sermons aloud and to deliver mock preachments in the tones of his father or the other divines of the community.

"My father had dreams of my being a great preacher," he says, and laughs. The ironic story is that the reading of his father's pious library first turned the boy to doubts of Christianity and finally against all religion.

But as a youngster Philip liked the prestige and sociability of his father's position. "I used to go with my father," he says, "on visits to the homes of his scattered congregation. I liked these trips because I had the run of the houses where we visited. I took advantage of my father's standing as a preacher. My mother would have scolded me for some of the things I did on these visits, but my father was very indulgent."

He also seems to have taken advantage of his brother's brilliance. "Philip would take a brash stand about anything," a friend reports, "relying on his brother's brains to back him up. But the point is that Philip was always the one who took the stand."

Randolph does not remember much racial discrimination. "When I was a child," he says, "there was not the segregation in Florida that we find now. We were much more free. I can remember when the Jim Crow streetcars were first put into use. My mother dared us to ride in one of those cars. She resented the segregation, as did many Negroes in Florida."

Yet there must have been enough Jim Crow about for the boys to feel it. One of the favorite stories about Randolph is that he and his brother used to play games of fighting for Negro rights. Warned that if he kept on with that sort of thing he would be strung up, Philip answered, "Oh, no, I won't. I'll go North and fight."

A shy—and blustering—youngster, he was strangely

given to long periods of brooding. Incidents, wrongs, slights, which might easily have passed over other boys, seemed to stick in his soul and make him fret and ponder. Anyway, he didn't play much, he didn't go around with girls at all, and he brooded a great deal.

One of his friends says, "He was always over-earnest. Dogged diligence—that's Randolph. If he has any gaiety in his nature or any sense of humor, he never shows it either in private conversation or before the public."

After finishing high school, Philip went North and lived for years the hand-to-mouth existence so common to Negro migrants of that period. He got odd jobs—as an elevator operator, as porter in an electric light office, as waiter on the Fall River Line boats. He took some night courses at the College of the City of New York. But most of his knowledge continued to come from his reading of "serious books."

He took up Shakespeare, got a tutor to show him how to read the plays and poems in sonorous Oxford English, and gave public readings at church clubs and literary societies. He also did a lot of street-corner speaking. He would stand on a soap box, or any kind of platform, at a busy Harlem corner and talk of the Negro's ills, the doctrines of socialism, the faults of capitalism. His passionate words and his pleasant, resonant voice brought people flocking around to hear him.

It was at this period that he set his style in speech and manner. He read Shakespeare with a broad English accent and assumed the mode of an English scholar in his conversation and public speaking. To this day, even before the roughest labor groups, he speaks of "the claasses and the maasses," and nobody laughs.

In 1915, Randolph married a young woman somewhat older than he, who worked as head of the New York branch

of the Madame Walker hair lotions. This competent wife helped to keep the couple going during the early years in New York when jobs were scarce and life was hard.

About these early days—the life in Florida and the struggles in New York—Randolph does not talk much. It is clear that his interests are not in friends or family, but in “the cause.” And there is no record that gives more than a vague picture of his life up to the time of the First World War and the beginning of his long fight for labor and the common man. From then on the record is full and heroic. And about these “serious things” Randolph is ready enough to talk.

His first effort toward organizing workers was a quick, flat failure. On one of his early jobs, as a waiter on a boat of the Fall River Line, he started a mass protest against the living quarters of the workers. The manager overheard Randolph stirring up his fellows, and had him fired and off the boat before the frightened waiters could even present their plea.

But failure never daunted him. As is said of the British armies, he is accustomed in any war to lose all the battles but the last one. In the few jobs he had during the early days in New York, he was always getting into trouble because he kept agitating for better working conditions. But he kept right on agitating, never content simply to hold a job himself, or to get himself ahead.

In 1917, Randolph began to attract public notice. With Chandler Owen, he launched a monthly magazine, *The Messenger*. This was a strange partnership. Owen was brilliant, witty, versatile, often likened to H. L. Mencken. Randolph was earnest, plodding, and absolutely unswerving. The editors blazoned from the masthead of their paper: “The Only Radical Negro Magazine in America.” In an early issue, Randolph declared, “We do not accept the doctrine of the old, reactionary Negroes that the Negro is satisfied to

be himself, because of our recognition that the principle of social equality is the only sure guarantee of social justice."

Randolph got into his first big trouble by protesting against the First World War. He refused to serve, and he went about the country making speeches against America's joining the war, against Negroes fighting in it.

"I was fundamentally and morally opposed to the war," he has said. "I am a pacifist so far as national wars are concerned. I criticized in *The Messenger* and in public speeches the hypocrisy of the slogan 'making the world safe for democracy' when Negroes were lynched, jim-crowed, disfranchised and segregated in America."

In 1918, while making one of his public protests in Cleveland, Ohio, he was arrested by the Department of Justice and thrown into jail. Although he was released in a few days, "patriots" began to denounce him. One paper branded him "the most dangerous Negro in America."

This persecution simply drove him to fight harder. He staunchly held his stand as a pacifist and—much worse to his respectable friends—a Socialist. During and following the war, he ran for Secretary of State for New York, for the New York Assembly, and for Congress, all on the Socialist ticket. His ability to rouse a following, even at that early day, was shown when in 1917 over 25 per cent of the Negroes in New York City voted the Socialist ticket.

In the years of reaction following the war, he was hounded as a radical, a Socialist, a Communist. The term "Bolshevik," often hurled at him, was a joke—or tragedy—of the loose thinking of the foes of any sort of liberalism. While Randolph is radical, he has from the beginning been one of America's most consistent foes of Communism.

Of course the red baiters made no distinctions. All radicals looked alike to them. Determined to keep the fight on principles instead of on names, Randolph once said:

If approval of the right to vote, based upon service instead of race and color, is Bolshevism, count us as Bolsheviks. If our approval of the abolition of pogroms is Bolshevism, stamp us again with that epithet. If the demand for political and social equality is Bolshevism, label us once more. . . .

All this time Randolph was writing as much as he was speaking. In addition to the stream of articles in *The Messenger*, his work began to appear in many other papers. While he took part in a number of union campaigns, Randolph says that, up to 1925, he considered himself a writer and editor rather than a labor organizer.

That his great work should have been with the Pullman porters was as accidental as the small incidents which set the careers of most of us. He had never been a porter. He did not know the problems at first hand. He knew only what was reported to him. He knew that four times during the early decades of the century the porters and maids on the Pullman cars had tried to organize, only to be beaten by inertia, by threats, and by wholesale dismissals of union members or "agitators." As a final wall against any real union, the corporation had set up a company union, the Pullman Porters Benefit Association, which offered small sickness and death benefits in return for dues of \$26 a year. At first the porters gladly joined the Benefit Association because, Randolph says, "They were not able to realize that an organization which is handed down by the boss to the wage earners is for the benefit of the boss and not the wage earner."

Unorganized, the porters and maids were helpless. Work stretched out unendingly—300 and 400 hours a month. From monthly wages of \$77.50 were deducted "average expenses" of \$33. Tips averaged \$54 a month in good years, less than half of that in bad times. Porters received less pay for overtime than for straight work. They had to buy their own

uniforms and incidentals, even their own shoe polish. They paid for their own meals in the dining cars. Most of them were married, with families to support at the home end of the run, and so had double living expenses since they had to buy board and lodging for themselves at the far end.

It was this situation that Randolph and half a dozen men, meeting in a little club in Harlem in August 1925, swore to fight to a finish. The group elected Randolph president and organizer of a union which had not yet come into being. The masthead of *The Messenger* was changed to "The Official Organ of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters," and the fight was on.

Building the union was hard and slow. Many porters so feared for their jobs that they did not dare join. Others signed up secretly and were careful never to discuss labor conditions with anyone. The company fought the union with spies and threats. Five hundred porters were fired for union activity during the Brotherhood's first ten years. The company stirred up colored leaders—and is alleged to have bribed some of them—to denounce Randolph as a radical and the union as seditious "socialism" and "communism." Many ministers opposed the Brotherhood because they were told that Randolph did not believe in God and held dangerous political theories. The Railroad Labor Board refused to protect the union; judges declined to rule against the Benefit Association, saying there was no evidence that it was company controlled. The Interstate Commerce Commission would not investigate the moot subject of wages and tips.

Randolph worked on. He toured the country for the Brotherhood, taking advantage of his standing as editor of *The Messenger* to speak before important labor, civic, and college groups. He aired the case in his magazine. He capitalized on his arguments before the Mediation Board and the Interstate Commerce Commission, for it was then a rare



thing for a Negro labor leader to appear before these bodies. All this pleased the Pullman porters who began to take pride in the feats of their leader. They turned out to hear him speak and sat enthralled over words which he packed with emotion and oratory.

Brothers . . . when I enlisted in the cause, I knew that slanderers would attempt to blacken my character with infamy. I knew that among the wicked, corrupt and unenlightened my pleadings would be received with disdain and reproach; that persecution would assail me on every side; that the dagger of the assassin would gleam behind my back, . . . that I would be branded as a disturber of peace, as a madman, fanatic, and incendiary, a Communist, Anarchist and whatnot; that love would be turned into hatred, confidence into suspicion, respect into derision. . . . I knew that the base and servile would accuse me of being actuated with the hope of reward. But, Brethren, I am undaunted and unafraid. The only reward that I seek is that your cause secures a full and complete vindication.

The union grew. By 1928 the Brotherhood, with over half the porters and maids organized, was ready to strike for better working conditions and wages. The company countered by granting a small wage increase and by bringing in a corps of Filipinos to take posts as helpers in club cars and thus scare the Negroes into thinking they might lose their "right" to the Pullman jobs. This was a tough spot for Randolph, but he refused to be drawn into a race fight.

"The porters are not opposed to Filipinos," he declared, "because Negroes would be the last people in the world to manifest any race prejudice against anybody; but we are opposed to people being brought in and permitted to take over our jobs in disregard of the principles of seniority."

The Pullman Company announced that it would look

more favorably on the Brotherhood if the membership would remove Randolph, "a known Socialist, and an outsider."

Randolph replied, "Of course labor leaders are outsiders, and if they were not outsiders they would be, as soon as the capitalists learned their identity."

Finally, William Green "advised against any drastic action," and the Brotherhood, not powerful enough yet to act without the co-operation of the A. F. of L., called off the strike.

The porters were discouraged. Memberships and dues fell off. Almost bankrupt, the headquarters office had to give up its telephone and electric service. At just this time, a check running into five figures came from a man whom Randolph suspected of some connection with the Pullman Company. The man's letter said Randolph had done all any person could be expected to do and now that the cause was lost he asked him to accept this gift as a reward for service and "take a trip to Europe." Although he didn't have so much as the next month's rent for the office or for his own home, Randolph sent the check straight back with a polite, cool note.

He didn't admit for a minute that the cause was lost. He kept right on working: writing in his own paper, making provocative statements that got space in the white and Negro press, speaking at mass meetings and at schools and churches when he could get in.

He was grieved by the failure of the respectable elements in his own race to support the labor crusade. One of the few "intellectuals" who came to his aid was James Weldon Johnson, poet and crusader. He publicly sponsored the movement, and he got two donations from the Garland Fund—of which he was a trustee—to tide the Brotherhood over its most barren years.

But most of the white-collar Negroes held aloof from this labor battle. The powerful Negro weekly, the *Chicago Defender*, bitterly opposed the Brotherhood in the early years. It claimed that the company union was adequate and that Randolph's agitation was futile and dangerous.

Randolph issued a ringing reply to "the *Chicago Surrender*, misnamed *Defender*, the World's Greatest Weakly." Toward the end of 1928, the *Defender* reversed its policy and since then, with other important Negro papers, it has backed the Brotherhood and all efforts to organize Negro workers.

While uncompromising in his public stand and honest almost to the point of fanaticism, Randolph was not above appealing to the porters in their own terms. Though he was an atheist, he knew that many of the Negro workers came from deeply religious homes. So in his speeches and in the Brotherhood paper, *The Black Worker*, he fell back on the Biblical language and imagery he had learned from his father. He spread at the top of his bulletins the Bible text, "Ye shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free." He pointed out that the church should support labor "since Jesus Christ was a carpenter." He was called "a Moses leading the people from the Land of Bondage into the Promised Land." Sentences rehearsed in his childhood rolled movingly off his tongue:

"Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid," is the injunction from the prophet of a new world Brotherhood. It is a challenge and a promise to the millions worn and oppressed by the heartless hands of capitalists.

Stand upon thy feet and the God of Truth and Justice and Victory will speak unto thee.

Randolph believed that workers, white and black alike, had a common cause and that only through unity could they

win economic security. Yet, knowing the force of a racial appeal, he fed the ego of the Negro workers by telling them how the white world would hail their success. "Brotherhood men are a crucial challenge to the Nordic creed of the white race's superiority," he said, "for only white men are supposed to organize for power, for justice and freedom."

Success began to come. Porters flocked into the union. Churches and newspapers swung in behind the movement. The 1934 amendments to the Railway Labor Act, outlawing company unions and guaranteeing collective bargaining, gave the chance for victory. The porters and maids put up half a million dollars from their pitiful earnings to make the final push. After a whirlwind campaign in 1935, by a vote of 5931 to 1422, the workers chose the Brotherhood to speak for them in collective bargaining. And in 1937 the Pullman Company signed a contract with the Brotherhood.

A mass meeting was held by Harlem porters to welcome Randolph back from his victory in Chicago. He came bearing gifts: two million dollars in pay increases, a cut in the monthly mileage from 11,000 to 7000 miles; shorter working time—240 hours a month instead of the old unending shifts; striking changes in conditions of work.

Victory was no more a stop to Randolph's efforts than failure had been. He went right on working—dogged and plodding as ever. Since the Brotherhood was a member of the American Federation of Labor, he worked at conventions, at mass meetings, in committees and private talks to get the Federation to wipe out racial bars in all its unions. He pointed out that "labor had paid dearly for its own lack of democracy, for capital kept labor weakened for decades by the use of masses of unorganized and 'unaccepted' workers, first newly arrived immigrants and then the Negro millions who swarmed up from the South to the industrial cen-

ters." He declared, "Labor never can win fully until it opens its doors freely and equally to all workers."

While victories have not changed Randolph's will to fight, they have transformed his standing. He is now powerful in labor circles, and he is almost a god to the great mass of Negro workers. The porters look upon him with pride and awe. They accept his broad a's, his flowery phrases, his fastidious dress, the fact that he has never been a porter and is therefore really an outsider, because they trust him fully. He has given them good reason. He has never been known to break a promise, carrying out even the smallest obligation with scrupulous care. While it is difficult for important personages to get an appointment with him, members of the union see him easily. He accepted no salary at all in the early days of the Brotherhood. Even today his salary is small, and he and his wife live very simply in a four-room Harlem flat. Best of all, he has won great benefits for all the thousands of Pullman porters and maids and their families and dependents.

Randolph did not oppose the Second World War. While still "a pacifist in general," he claims that "this war is different." In explaining his stand, he says:

Although democracies have not given full rights to minority peoples, I think democracy offers them much greater opportunity than they have in totalitarian states. In a Fascist state a minority group cannot struggle for equality; they have no rights. Because of that, it is important that we support the United Nations in the present war.

Randolph's position in this war is to back the United Nations, but to fight to bring full democracy at home just as valiantly as we fight abroad. He is the leader of forces demanding "absolute equality for Negroes in America—now." And it is this fight that has won his greatest following among the Negro people.

Impatient at the grudging concessions to Negroes in the armed forces and in war jobs, he organized a "March on Washington" in which he threatened to bring thousands of angry Negroes to the nation's capital to protest their wrongs. The idea caught on with Negroes and was given wide publicity and support by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, the National Urban League, civic, church, trade-union and educational movements. The President's advisers became seriously concerned. After hurried conferences between Washington and New York, the President issued Executive Order 8802, forbidding discrimination in employment by companies holding defense contracts, and he appointed a Fair Employment Practice Committee to see that the order was carried out. In return, the March on Washington was called off.

This victory added to the people's faith in Randolph's power. Although the march itself never took place, Randolph has kept alive an organization officially known as "The March on Washington Movement."

The power of the new movement is mysterious. It has almost no organization, no big machine for promotion and publicity. Yet it grips the people's imagination and holds their loyalty. Masses of the darker common people are looking to Randolph as the modern Messiah.

At a mass meeting, called in New York in 1942 with almost no advance publicity, twenty thousand Negroes crowded into Madison Square Garden. They applauded for hours the speeches of Walter White, Clayton Powell, and a dozen others. Although the thousands had been drawn by his magnetism, Randolph did not speak that night at all! Yet the rally is always spoken of as "Randolph's Madison Square Meeting."

A similar rally was held a few weeks later in Chicago. Again thousands of colored working people poured out, al-

most without notice. After much oratory, Philip Randolph stood up amid cheers and hosannas—and read a list of the agencies sponsoring the meeting! Everybody seemed satisfied, and almost everyone who attended felt he had got his rousement not from the many speakers but from the Saint himself.

In the March on Washington Movement, Randolph frankly stresses racial solidarity. Where before he had insisted that all races must fight together for their common rights, he has made the March on Washington exclusively Negro. In place of his earlier belief in a united labor party, he now urges a tightly organized Negro non-partisan bloc.

The most striking—and least clear—proposal in Randolph's present movement is what he calls "Non-Violent Good Will Direct Action." He claims it has features in common with Gandhi's civil disobedience movement, but that his proposal is for civil obedience. Some of the things he urges under this head are that white and colored friends go in groups to insist on equal service in restaurants, theaters, hotels, shops. Such groups are already working in several cities. In the South he urges special boycott days against Jim Crow trains, busses, schools. He insists that there must be no violence in these actions. If in the course of them Negroes or white friends suffer any injury, they must not fight back or use violent language or try to recover damages in court. "This is part of the price which must be paid," he says, "in sacrifice and suffering, to eliminate an evil which has been acquiesced in and permitted to exist through inaction and fear."

The March on Washington Movement welcomes every kind of agitation and organization in the fight for Negro rights, but it is especially devoted to mass action.

Randolph says:

Nothing stirs and shapes public sentiment like physical action. . . . This is why the major weapon of labor is the strike. It is why the major weapon of business is the Lock-out and the Shut-down. All people feel, think, and talk about a physical formation of people, whoever they may be. This is why wars grip the imagination of man. Mass demonstrations against "Jim Crow" are worth a million editorials and orations in anybody's paper and on any platform. . . . Marches and picketing will not only touch and arrest the attention of the powerful public officials, but also the "little man" in the street. And, before this problem of "Jim Crow" can be successfully attacked, all of America must be shocked and awakened. . . . It is a technique and strategy which the "little Negro" in the tavern, pool room, on the streets, jitterbug, store-front preacher, and share-cropper, can use to help free the race.\*

Randolph is criticized as heartily as he is praised. Many Negroes oppose his new "lily-black" organization. They remind him of his own opposition to the all-Negro movement of Marcus Garvey, and of how emphatically he used to say, "Only solidarity can save the black and white workers of America." Randolph says about this change of position:

The March on Washington Movement is an all-Negro movement, but it is not anti-white, anti-American, anti-labor, anti-Catholic or anti-Semitic. It's simply pro-Negro. It does not rest so much upon race as upon the social problem of "Jim Crow." It does not oppose interracial organizations. It co-operates with the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and the National Urban League, and churches and trade unions that are mixed. Its validity lies in the fact that no one will fight as hard to re-

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\* This quotation and the one following are from a symposium, *What the Negro Wants*, and are reprinted by permission of the publishers, The University of North Carolina Press.



move and relieve pain as he who suffers from it. Negroes are the only people who are the victims of "Jim Crow," and it is they who must take the initiative and assume the responsibility to abolish it.

The strongest criticism—and most fervent praise—rages about Randolph as a mystic and dreamer. Roi Ottley, in *New World A-Coming*, says, "What seems to captivate Negroes is the impression he gives of being all *soul*." Critics say, "He is just a dreamer." They say, "The March on Washington Movement is a symbol and a force, not a plan and a strategy. Randolph dreams of a great mass movement, but he has no great plan for building mass action." Friends and critics alike point to the program adopted at Randolph's mass meetings.

1. Abrogation of every law which makes a distinction in treatment between citizens, based on religion, creed, color, or national origin.
2. Legislation to reinforce the constitutional guarantee that no person shall be deprived of life, liberty, or property without due process of law.
3. Legislation to end lynching.
4. Enactment of a poll tax bill, so that all barriers to the exercise of the right to vote are eliminated.
5. Abolition of segregation and discrimination in the armed forces.
6. Withholding of federal funds from any agency which discriminates in the use of the funds.
7. An end to discrimination in jobs and job training.
8. Representation for Negroes on all missions, political and technical, which will be sent to the peace conference.

Friends say, "Is there any clearer statement of the demands of Negroes for *practical* reforms *now*?" Critics answer, "Sure these are fine sentiments. But where is the program even to try to put them into effect?"

Some even doubt that Randolph is holding his power with

the masses. He certainly has the full support of every porter and maid in the Brotherhood. It is behind him so strongly that it gladly pays the costs of his new movement. But outside the Brotherhood Randolph may be losing much of his following. One careful observer says, "At first he caught the imagination of the multitude with the idea of doing something—actually going to Washington. When that was called off, there was nothing to hold the crowd together. And he has been slow in planning any program for the new movement. It is ironical that when he had a following he had no plan, and now that he has worked out a program there is no movement."

Negroes who are in the thick of struggles for practical reform say Randolph hasn't the courage, or ability, to do his own fighting. They say, "Randolph has the uncompromising idea and takes the bold stand, but others have to back up his dreams with plans and action." As examples they point to his refusal to accept positions on government and civic boards, even the place offered him on the Fair Employment Practice Committee. "The Committee was his idea. Why wasn't he willing to help make it work?"

The more generous of Randolph's critics find an explanation in an analysis of his character. They point out the conflict between Randolph the gentle, reasonable, peaceful man, and Randolph the belligerent, uncompromising champion of Negro rights. They say, "He doesn't want to get himself into a position where he'll have to discuss and compromise. He believes there must be absolute equality and that the Negro must accept nothing less. Yet he is afraid of his own yielding nature, afraid that he might be persuaded to compromise principle in order to get something practical. So he removes himself from temptation by dodging responsibility for carrying his theories through."

That explanation scarcely covers the man's great moral

courage and the whole history of his career. An ivory-tower Randolph does not explain the soap-box lecturer who had the courage to preach pacifism during the First World War. It does not explain the man who took up the cause of labor before it became fashionable and profitable, who struggled along for bitter and thankless years on a pittance, and won through to a very practical victory. It does not explain the creation of the Fair Employment Practice Committee, for which he is given major credit.

A. Philip Randolph has done heroic work in organizing the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters and winning the pioneer fight that has given the base for the present upsurge of Negroes in the labor movement. Whatever the outcome of his present crusading, he is stating the goal of absolute justice and equality more drastically than any other colored leader. He has inspired the multitude with hope and courage. In the struggle to bring full democracy to America he has a high and honored place.

# CHAMPION OF THE WORLD



**JOE LOUIS**

# CHAMPION OF THE WORLD

**J**OE LOUIS is more than a champion; he is a symbol. Four million colored boys have felt a fresh hope since this brown hero fought his way to unrivaled eminence. Thirteen million Negroes in America and millions of colored people throughout the world have felt a new pride since Louis has stood so long on the dizzy pinnacle of pugilistic fame without scandal, without even any act of bad taste. Many claim that Joe Louis is the greatest factor in America for Negro honor and interracial good will.

Joe's parents were Alabama sharecroppers, his father half white and his mother part Indian. His mother's story of Joe's childhood was tersely given to Earl Brown for the magazine *Life*: "Dat boy was born in 1914. We was livin' in Alabama then. He weighed about 11 pounds when he was born and 'cept for an earache when he was a kid, he never been sick a day in his life. He's always been healthy and strong, 'cause I fed him plenty collard greens, fat back, and corn pone. He didn't talk till he was six. He always liked to sleep too much. It was worth my life to get him outa dat bed."

Joe's father walked out of the family's cotton patch on Buckalew Mountain when Joe was only three years old. Some years later his mother married another tenant farmer, Pat Brooks, and moved with him and her whole family to Detroit. Of the first years in the North Mrs. Brooks reports: "We was always hungry. Joe didn't even have shoes to put on when he went to school."

His mother had little to give her children in money or

educated guidance. But she had a strong sense of right and wrong, and a firm hand. Among Negroes the mother has often been the one force that has held the family together. In slave days she was the only parent recognized by law, the only person to whom the children could cling. Even to this day a mother is often found to be the rallying point of Negro families.\*

In the best tradition of her race, Joe's mother says, "I wanted all my children to be decent." And some way—in spite of the poverty of southern tenancy and the chaos of city slums—she raised her brood of seven children with a feeling for right and a sense of honor. The first thing she did when Joe began to make money was to repay \$269 to the Welfare Department of Detroit, even though the relief had been given without any strings five years before.

Joe grew up with a tough gang in the Detroit slums. His name, Joseph Louis Barrow, was quickly shortened in street parlance to Joe Louis—and it has been that to the world ever since. These denizens of the Detroit jungles got into lots of trouble, stealing their way into movies, slipping fruit from passing trucks, throwing mud at the cops, and fighting among themselves. But Joe never moved over from deviltry into crime.

None of the gang was keen about school, and Joe never

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\* A tribute to the power of the Negro mother comes in the famous work-song "Water Boy." In the voice of a black convict on the chain gang, the song starts:

Water Boy,  
Where are you hidin'  
If you don't come,

Listeners wait for some dire threat of violence from this tough criminal, only to hear:

If you don't come,  
I'm gwine tell-a your Mammy.

A striking salute from the depths of folk wisdom to the place of the Negro mother in discipline as well as in love and security.

got beyond the fourth grade. Unable to absorb book learning, he went for a time to trade school. But that didn't seem to take either. He worked on an ice wagon, sold papers, rustled a buck where he could. He was one of thousands of colored kids who roamed the streets of the northern industrial cities during the twenties, dog poor, happy-go-lucky, but some way through it all "keeping decent."

In the street fights and in the boxing matches that were the chief sport of the gang, Joe showed that pound for pound he was the best fighter in the lot. One day he filled in as a sparring partner for a friend who was something of an amateur boxer. Joe took a terrible lathering. But somewhere during the ordeal he landed a right: his opponent hit the floor and stayed there. Joe was more interested in the beating he had taken than in the knockout, and set himself to learning how to defend himself. In 1931 he began to take regular lessons at the Brewster Street Boxing Center.

Opportunity was being offered to young boxers to show their stuff and to fight their way up through the Golden Gloves, a newspaper-sponsored boxing tournament. In this national competition Joe came up slowly and painfully. In one bout he was floored nine times. But he kept at it. In 1932 he won the amateur light-heavyweight championship in the Detroit Golden Gloves and was on his way.

At this crucial period John Roxborough walked into Joe's life, and two years later Julian Black—men who have stayed with him ever since as managers, guides, and friends. A great old Negro welterweight, Jack Blackburn, came in as trainer and, until he died in 1942, he also stuck as close and protectingly as a father. The influence of these men on the hero has been great and good. Boxing had fallen into bad odor in the early thirties. Champions were scarce and far from glamorous. Faking and cheating were everywhere, with gunmen more and more in evidence at the ringside. Every fight had a



"business angle," many were "fixed." Swindlers, fakers, and racketeers were all over the place. For Negro fighters it was still worse. One manager, on being faced with Joe Louis, cried, "Take him away. A colored boxer who can fight and won't lay down can't get any fights; and if he lays down he's a stumble bum." And the memory of Jack Johnson's scandals was still a national stench. Against this background his managers set out—just as his mother had—"to keep Joe decent" and to make his fights spectacular but clean.

They were a strange trio to become coaches of a Galahad, promoters of racial uplift and good will. Both Roxborough and Black had reputations that tied them to the policy racket and the shadier sides of Detroit life. Blackburn had the odor common to the prize ring. Maybe their very knowledge of evil warned them of the dangers a champion must avoid, especially a Negro champion. Anyway, as managers they have a record of absolutely honest and honorable dealings and of keeping their champion fit and clean.

After two years of hard work and skilful training, when Louis was ready to try the Golden Gloves contest in Chicago, he met one of those instances of race prejudice that make success for any Negro many times as hard as for a white man. A plot was hatched to squelch the threat of a colored champion. Just before the bell for Joe's bout, a crew of detectives rushed into his dressing room and carried him off to the Eleventh Street Police Station to grill him on a charge of murdering his wife in Gary, Indiana, in 1929. Louis, who would have been fourteen at the time of the alleged wife killing, had no trouble proving his innocence—but by that time the bout was over.

Joe and his managers followed their course of not squawking over failures, whatever the cause, and of stolidly plodding on. And before the year was half over Joe Louis made his

debut as a professional heavyweight boxer, symbolically on July 4—Independence Day. Of this first professional bout (in 1934 against Jack Kracken, the Chicago heavyweight), Paul Gallico, the sports writer, reports:

Blackburn said to his new pupil, "Jes hit him in de body with bof han' an' when he drop his guard crack him on de chin." The bell rang. Joe pitched for the body. Kracken dropped his guard. *Whang!* went a left hook. ". . . nine, ten, and out!" said the referee. The most amazing career in the history of the prize ring was begun.

Fight by fight, for thirty-six bouts, Joe Louis fought his way up until on June 22, 1937, he knocked out James J. Braddock and became the second Negro ever to hold the title of champion of the world. He has held that title from that day to this with a record that exceeds any boxer in all history. He has knocked out five world's champions. He has defended his title twenty-one times, more than the preceding eight champions together. All told he has won fifty-seven professional fights, forty-eight of them by knockouts: four of these knockouts in the first round, one in the record time of two minutes and four seconds.

During all of his professional career he has been knocked out but once—by Max Schmeling in 1936. That defeat was the turning point in Louis' career. Too much victory had tended to make him cocky and lazy. Defeat was just the thing he needed, at just the time he needed it. Pounded and knocked down by Schmeling time after time, he struggled back to his feet, fighting it out until he was knocked cold.

Beaten, he did not whine, nor accuse his rival of foul play, nor offer an alibi. He took his medicine. All his life he has had to learn his lessons by hard knocks. But he learns them. As Jack Blackburn used to say: "Dat boy nebber made de

same mistake twice." He went stolidly to work to get into condition again, to correct his faults, to be ready from then on to beat every man he met.

His return match with Schmeling became his private crusade. By 1938, when they met again, Schmeling had become an out-and-out Nazi. So Joe Louis was fighting a scornful member of the "master race" as well as the only man who had ever humbled him in the ring. Louis is so stolid in his face and manners that few people knew how hotly the crusade boiled within him. But they knew it when the bell rang and Joe came out of his corner. Paul Gallico has graphically told this fight in *Liberty*:

It took Louis four seconds to reach Schmeling and let fly the first left hook. Two minutes later the German was a hospital case. Never has a challenger been torn to pieces in so brief a span—and Schmeling was one of the craftiest, most seasoned boxers in the game. Spectators felt something akin to terror as they watched him being literally destroyed before their eyes. The first vicious hooks fogged the Nazi. He clung to the ropes and screamed aloud with pain when Louis smashed a right into his ribs. Iron fists crashed into his eyes, his mouth, his body. For Schmeling it must have been a nightmare of purest hell, an abyss of seemingly eternal pain and concussion. Twice he went to the floor, to arise only by instinct. Two minutes, but it must have seemed a lifetime. When he went down for the third time, Schmeling was no longer a man—he was a . . . *Thing*.

In this defeat and this triumph Joe Louis grew up. Even his manners changed. Where he had seemed taciturn and sullen, he was now pleasant and friendly. The defeat knocked out his cockiness and carelessness. The victory released something that had been pent up in him, made him more human and at ease with himself and his fellows.

Among signs of his new poise and confidence was his

courtesy to his opponents. He had always fought fair. This fairness now became magnanimous, tops in good sportsmanship.

He even gave a good word to his hated rival: "Dat Schmeling," he said, "you got to give him credit. He stuck to the rules all the time."

In setting himself a sterner regime, he said to a friend: "If I ever do anything to disgrace my race, I hope to die."

In his fight with Billy Conn he won the hearts of the world by a spontaneous, gallant act. He had been outpointed for ten rounds, and it began to look as if Conn would win. In the eleventh, Conn lost his balance, dropped his guard. Louis stood over him, his right hand cocked. His championship was at stake. It would have been a punch no one could have criticized had he let go. But Joe stepped back—to the applause of 60,000 fans. Conn regained his balance, the two men touched gloves, and the fight went on. Two rounds later Louis knocked Conn out with a terrific clean blow to the chin.

His fame has never touched his modesty and simplicity. Once as he passed through Cleveland he was dragged off to see and be seen by the Negro students of a technical high school. Glowing with admiration of the machines and handicrafts the boys had made, this man who had conquered the world with his fists exclaimed in all sincerity: "I always wished I could do something with my hands. Never could."

Even with the mellowed personality that emerged from the Schmeling duel, Joe Louis is still no social light or plaster saint. He has a strong male's hearty interest in women—and women have run after him, white and black and brown, storming for his favors. Liquor seems never to have been a problem: his strongest drink by choice to this day is Coca Cola. His favorite pastime still is sleeping—twelve hours out of every day, regularly, and fourteen when he is in heavy

training. He still prefers loafing and joking and playing cards with his boyhood cronies to mingling in high society.

He is no chatterbox. His talks over the radio at the end of his fights or at such public gatherings as he gets dragged into are far from polished orations. Once when some of his friends tried to groom him for public office and got him onto his feet at a rally, his total contribution to political thinking was "Ah'm glad to be here." At the next meeting his record was even better. "Hello," he said into the elaborate set of loud speakers, and sat down.

Yet often in his brief responses he has said more than other people do in long orations.

When he decided to fight his last bout and go off to help defend his country, he said, in reply to the protests of his friends: "You ought to do everything you can at a time like this. You can't think of yourself now."

To a group of inquiring reporters, he said: "You got to look at it this way. You do whatever you do for your country. That's natural. Your country is what made everything possible for you. That's how you figure."

When someone pointed out that it was strange that he should want to fight for a country that had treated his people so badly, he said, "Yes, my people's had a tough time, but Hitler can't fix it."

Joe Louis is a symbol not only to Negroes but to democracy in America. His public is as interesting as the man himself. At first the white populace was indifferent or even hostile to the colored champion. Glee gurgled up in the cocktail rooms and about the village stores when Schmeling put this Negro in his place. On the other hand, the colored people from the beginning hailed the brown bomber as a god. It is said that eight Negroes dropped dead from heart failure as they listened to the radio accounts of the Schmeling knock-out, and for days the colored sections North and South were

sunk in gloom. When Louis beat Schmeling there was riotous dancing in the streets in Harlem and Chicago, pride and joy in millions of Negro homes, even prayers of thanksgiving in Negro churches. Roi Ottley, Negro reporter, has described a typical celebration in Harlem following the Joe Louis victory.

Pandemonium broke loose. Tens of thousands marched through the streets, slapping backs, shaking hands, and congratulating each other. There was shouting, clapping, laughing, and even crying. Youngsters who should have long been in bed were on the streets pounding dishpans and yelling. The din was deafening. Thousands stormed through the streets chanting, "We want Joe! We want Joe! . . ." Horns were tooted, cymbals crashed, and radios shrieked. Much whiskey was guzzled. To the music of juke-boxes which blared forth from every barroom, young couples on the sidewalks broke away from the crowds and went into furious Lindy Hops and Susy Q's, while the old folks capered happily. Urchins climbed aboard automobiles and busses, unable to pass through the dense crowds, and good-naturedly screamed their happiness. The hilarity lasted until the early hours of the morning.\*

Gradually his popularity has swept all classes. His simplicity, as well as his masterly fighting, has endeared him to sports writers and sport lovers the country over, and to the American millions.

One of the old taboos in our society was against any Negro standing face to face against a white man, let alone striking a white man in public. But in Joe Louis' case the nation tolerates it, glories in it. America cheers in fuller and fuller voice as this Negro stands up year after year and knocks the tar out of every white man that comes along. And applause has deep-

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\* From *New World A-Coming*. Reprinted with the permission of the publisher, Houghton Mifflin Company.

ened to admiration as through all the triumph and fame he has so magnificently kept modest and sporting and decent.

Joe Louis has made a lot of money in the course of winning and holding his championship—more than two million dollars—but he has spent a lot, too. It is doubtful if he has now any large pile of cash or securities. He owns two apartment houses on the Chicago South Side. He has built up a handsome country estate in Michigan, said to have cost in land and buildings \$100,000. He has provided generously for his mother and sister. And he is openhanded, to the despair of his managers, with all his friends, especially any who turn up from Alabama or from his former haunts on the streets of Detroit.

In 1935 he married Marva Trotter, a pretty, light-colored stenographer, who had grown up in Chicago. Their marriage was not a success. They didn't like each other's friends and had few common interests. Joe was engrossed in his boxing and in the life that went with it, Marva in having a gay time in smart colored café society. She was so fond of clothes that she once kept a dress shop just for fun and had a personal wardrobe, including mink coats, silver foxes, scores of gowns, and hundreds of shoes, that was estimated at not less than \$35,000. In 1941 she sued for divorce, but they patched up their differences. Joe wooed her again in the judge's chambers, and carried her out of the court in his mighty arms. A child was born to them early in 1943 and named Jacqueline in honor of Joe's friend and trainer, Jack Blackburn. While Joe and Marva are devoted to the little girl, her birth did not bring them closer together. Mrs. Louis began to give much of her time to the child and to causes that affect the Negro's welfare. But her new interests did not save the marriage. In September 1943 a separation was announced.

One of Joe's earliest ambitions was to play the trumpet, and he keeps on with his musical efforts in spite of the jeers

of his friends. He likes to go to night clubs, not so much for the dancing, which he is too lazy to do much of, but to listen to hot and swing bands and to get a chance to strum the piano or blow a horn in the fellowship of his musical heroes.

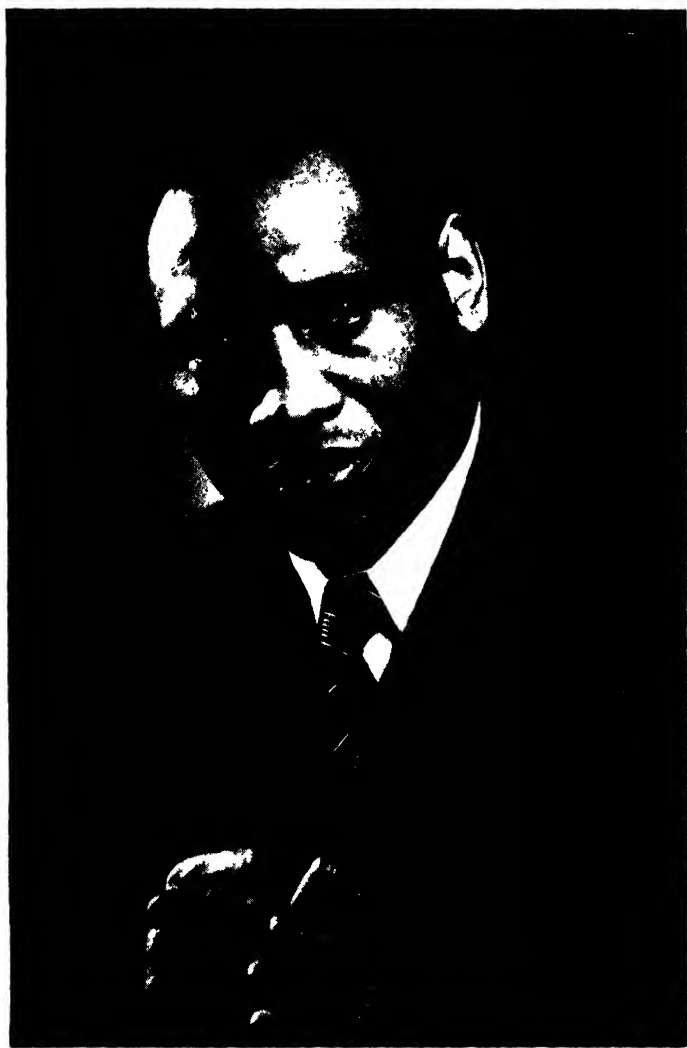
The greatest of his interests, outside boxing, is in the estate he has built at Springhill, twenty-two miles outside Detroit, on the site of a former station of the old Underground Railroad for slaves escaping from the South to Canada. On 477 acres of beautiful farm land he has built barns and a handsome house. He takes solid pleasure in his pens of Poland China hogs, in helping with the milking of the cows, and in grooming his two favorite horses, Jocko and Flash, that have already taken prizes at neighboring horse shows. He has talked of making this estate into a colored dude ranch and tourist camp, while continuing to run it as a model dairy farm and breeding stable. But the great interest of his life is boxing.

The final act of Joe Louis' championship brought the final wave of respect and admiration. Defending his title early in 1942, shortly after America's entrance into the war, he gave his whole huge share of the gate receipts to the Naval Relief Society, then knocked his opponent out cold in the first round. And he walked off to join in the defense of his country as a private in the Army.





# VOICE OF FREEDOM



PAUL ROBESON

# VOICE OF FREEDOM

**P**AUL ROBESON was born during the Spanish-American War, on April 9, 1898, and grew up in the booster period of American history. We were just starting our fling at imperialism, piously boasting the manifest destiny of America to guide and exploit our little brown brothers and "backward peoples" wherever we found them. Success was becoming America's god; success that was counted chiefly in dollars and had no relation to either merit or enjoyment. "Get rich quick" was a national slogan; "get away with anything you can get away with." Worth and taste were not so much scorned as simply ignored. The idol of millions of Americans was the super-successful magnate who soared to riches and power, and had no idea how to use his power or enjoy his wealth.

This was the America Paul Robeson was born to. He has won many of its highest prizes: a glamorous record in sports and scholarship that stands at the top to this day; world-wide fame on the platform and in the theater; success even with the American god of money, for his annual income has exceeded one hundred thousand dollars for many years, and his total earnings are far past the million mark. But he has never bowed to success nor allowed externals to take the place of joy and the good life.

Paul's father was a hard-working, tough-minded preacher. He had been born a slave on the Robeson plantation in North Carolina. In 1860, as a boy of fifteen, he escaped, followed a winding path north on the Underground Railway, and worked his way through Lincoln University which had been

established just outside Philadelphia for the education of "free persons of color."

His mother, a tall slender woman of strikingly Indian type, with straight black hair and reddish brown skin, was a Bustill. Her interesting family traced its ancestry back to 1608, through a labyrinth of Quakers, Indians, and Negroes high in American annals: painters, fighters, preachers, teachers, and sea captains.

The youngest of eight children, Paul was born in Princeton, New Jersey, where his father had preached to a little colored congregation for twenty-two years. When Paul was six, his mother, then a partially blind invalid, was tragically killed in the flames of her own dress lighted by a coal dropped from the kitchen stove. As the other children had grown and gone away, Paul lived on during his school days alone with his father who soon moved his church work to Westfield and finally to Somerville, a thriving little town in northern New Jersey.

The father was a patriarch among the small number of Negroes then in New Jersey. He was fifty-three years old when Paul was born. He was almost the only one of his group who had any formal education. He had worked his way up from slavery, through thrilling escapes, and struggle and study, to a place of eminence and respect. His goal was perfection.

There was solid love and companionship between the boy and the patriarch, and Paul came as near to meeting the high standards as anyone—except his father—could ask. School reports showed an almost constant stream of A's. An occasional B brought not so much reproof as hurt and disappointment. And when the final year's average in high school showed the amazing percentage of 97, the father sighed for the three points that might have made it 100. The

young man seems not to have resented but to have shared his father's wish for perfection. While he was in school he and the old man used to work out together the problems in arithmetic, the best English to use in translating Caesar's history and Cicero's orations. Even in college the visits home were full of long hours of close friendly talk about studies and sports, about the wonders of God and the strange ways of men.

The high school years in Somerville were happy and healthy. The handsome Negro boy was not only far and away at the top of his class; he was champion in sports as well. And he was as popular as he was talented. Chum of his schoolmates, he was as welcome in white homes as among the few Negroes of this northern village. He sang in the choir of his father's church and in any party his white cronies made up. This easy acceptance throughout his home town together with his father's constant stimulus were the early influences that molded Paul Robeson's character. All through his life he has taken his place easily and naturally, and has abundantly enjoyed his many friends. But memories of the old man's solid worth and his grief at Paul's failure to score 100 have kept him modest and steadily marching under the banner of "Excelsior."

Robeson was the third Negro to be admitted to Rutgers. His record was brilliant from the start, in popularity as well as in achievement. When his father died, toward the end of his course, Paul returned for his senior year seemingly bent on topping the ideal he and the sturdy old ex-slave had so earnestly plotted. When he was graduated in 1919 he had won his Phi Beta Kappa key, had been selected by Walter Camp as end on his All-American football team, had won his R in four different sports—a total of twelve athletic letters during his college career—had delivered the commencement

oration, and had been elected to Cap and Skull, the senior society made up of the four men who most fully represented the ideals of Rutgers.

After college he entered the Columbia Law School and settled down in Harlem. These years were a turning point. It is easy for a chap who has been a student hero to ride along on his name and then to turn sour as his popularity wanes. It is apt to be a miserable business as a glamour boy begins to realize that he has to win his spurs all over again in a tough and tedious adult career that is not likely ever to get the applause of his younger triumphs.

Few men of any race had Robeson's popularity as he came out of college. For four years the papers of the whole country had blazoned his pictures and his name. His engaging boyish personality had endeared him to a public that had gone mad over his miracles in football against the background of equally brilliant scholarship and public speaking. When he came to Harlem he was the idol of the town. His easy good nature did away with any need for awe, and he was "Paul" or "Robey" to everyone. He sang and danced and played, the central figure of every party. Boys shouted as he walked down the street. Girls fought for his smile. Gangsters and numbers kings saluted his prowess and his luck. Business men bowed before him.

Two things saved him from becoming a spoiled hero and maybe a sour failure. First, his modesty and sense of humor which made him see, even if his worshipers didn't, how slight a boyhood success is. Second, he met and married Essie Goode.

His wife at once became as sound an influence in his life as his father had been during his boyhood. Eslanda Cardoza Goode is a personality in many ways as interesting as her famous husband. Her mother had been a Cardoza of Charleston. And the Cardozas, both white and colored, were high in

South Carolina and Washington society. If anything, the colored members were even prouder than the white branch of the family, which, among many notables, produced a recent Justice of the United States Supreme Court.

One of the charming, light-skinned daughters of the Cardozas married a black nobody from Chicago, and from this union Eslanda was born. As she grew up with her mother's family in Washington—her father died when she was a child—she resented the snobbery of her relatives. She resolved to top their social pretensions by amounting to more than any of them. She entered the University of Illinois and majored in chemistry. Coming back to New York, she took her degree at Columbia University, studied medical chemistry for two years, and was appointed clinical pathologist at the Presbyterian Hospital of the Columbia Medical Center—an appointment rare enough for a Negro, and unheard of for a Negro woman.

It was as she was completing her medical study that she met Paul. Like every other girl she fell head over heels in love with the "huge handsome hero with the low rolling voice that tingled and tore the very soles off your feet." But Essie Goode wasn't just another lovesick girl bowled over by a football star. She was one of the girls who had won a high place outside the Harlem orbit of song and dance and drama. And she saw in Paul much more than a big, beautiful bruiser. It is no slight on her maiden modesty to suppose that she went about getting him with the same sound sense that she used in getting her degrees and her jobs. And Paul soon saw in her not only an adorable yellow gal but that same tough and solid worth that he had worshiped in his father.

They were married August 17, 1921, while Paul was just entering his second year of law school. They took a little room in Harlem, near Columbia, and supported themselves from her earnings at the hospital and from such odd jobs as



he could get. He played some professional football, although he hated to commercialize what had been to him a fine, clean sport.

As the months went on it was clear to Essie that Paul would be wasted in law. He was doing all right in his classes but with none of the brilliance and zest he had shown in college. Haggling over property titles or steering people through the toils of the law courts could never stir this man's enthusiasm. And his keen-eyed bride quickly learned that "unless he was wild about something he wasn't any good at it at all." She wanted him to become an actor, but he just laughed—that easygoing, lazy laugh.

Essie kept planning, however often her plans were swamped by laughter and by love. Paul not only chuckled at the idea of his acting, he was a bit shocked by it. He had been raised by a very pious father who had taught him that the theater was the outhouse of hell, and actors the errand boys of the devil. Finally Essie persuaded him to take part in a religious pageant at the Y.W.C.A., and he agreed to be the man who carried Jesus' cross up the hill of Golgotha in Torrence's play *Simon the Cyrenian*.

"Even then," he says, "I never meant to do it. I just said 'yes' to get her to quit pestering me."

But every evening, as he came home from law school, Essie was standing in front of the Y building which was right next door to their little apartment, and she dragged him in to rehearse. And when the play was given, Essie wheedled Jimmy Light and some of the other members of the Provincetown Players into going to see it. Later she got him to do a bit in a melodrama called *Voodoo*, which he played first with Margaret Wycherly and later with Mrs. Patrick Campbell.

Paul still feels that his wife made his theatrical career

without right or reason. "I was only on the stage a minute or two in *Simon the Cyrenian*," he says, laughing about it to this day. "I just stumbled along under a cardboard Sunday school cross and spoke one line. In *Voodoo* I was noticed and praised because of the famous actresses I was playing with, not because my acting was any good. But Essie thought I was some kind of David Garrick or Edwin Booth, and she put it over."

The upshot was that after he was graduated from law school and had served a brief clerkship in a law firm, the Provincetown Players asked him to come down and try some parts in their little theater on MacDougal Street. Almost before he knew what he was in for, he heard audiences wildly cheering his performance of *The Emperor Jones* and woke up to find himself a full-fledged member of the Provincetown Players.

He was relieved to be out of law. It had always seemed to him dull and dry. He had been called to a prized clerkship in a big New York firm, had drawn up some good briefs, and shown promise of legal ability, if not zest. But he noticed the resentment of some of his fellow-clerks, and even of one of the partners, at the presence of so conspicuous a Negro. He quit the firm. And for a time he began to draw into himself, as so many Negroes learn to do to shield themselves from sudden, unpredictable, unbearable hurts. He slept. He walked the friendly, noisy streets of Harlem. But he did not look for another job. In fact—so far as the records show—he has never looked for a job. He boasts that he is as good a loafer as any man living.

"A hammock is mighty sweet to me," he says, "and sitting around talking and maybe singing a little when the spirit moves is a pretty good heaven."

He has traveled only two of Shakespeare's roads to great-

ness. He has never achieved greatness. He was born great, and—almost against his easygoing inclination—he has had greatness thrust upon him.

Among the Provincetown Players he found a life he loved. They were just the crowd for him—keen, intelligent, full of zest—natural companions for his rich, bubbling personality. They opened to him the living worlds of art and literature and drama. He became fast friends with Eugene O'Neill, Robert Edmond Jones, Edna St. Vincent Millay, John Reid, Theodore Dreiser. All the people in this yeasty group—actors, authors, directors, scene shifters, friends—were in love with the things the little theater on MacDougal Street was trying to do. They were revolutionists, on fire with zeal for new forms of artistic expression.

"I've learned since," Robeson says, "that a lot of these people were radicals. But I wasn't interested in politics then, or economic theories; I was just interested in art with a great big A."

There were long talks with O'Neill about the meaning of the plays they were working on, especially about *All God's Chillun Got Wings* which went into rehearsal before *The Emperor Jones* was off the boards. Robeson worshiped O'Neill's genius. And of his friend's talents O'Neill wrote on the flyleaf of a book of his plays: "In gratitude to Paul Robeson, in whose interpretation of Brutus Jones I have found the most complete satisfaction an author can get—that of seeing his creation born into flesh and blood . . . but beyond that, true understanding and racial integrity."

Robeson loved the life and spirit of the MacDougal Street group: their freedom of mind, friendliness, informality; their lack of routine or "efficiency"; their leisurely, lazy life. Yet how they worked when anything was to be done! O'Neill would disappear completely when he was writing a new

play. As production started, everybody sprang into action—building scenery with their own hands, painting drops, printing circulars, designing and sewing their own costumes, and rehearsing hours on end. Then, after a successful opening and the big party in celebration, again the long lazy days: eating, drinking, talking, talking, talking.

Members of the group shared their talents. The author and the actor merged. Music and painting and sculpture were a part of the work and the joy of this versatile crowd. Antonio Salemme wanted to do a statue of Robeson.

"But I couldn't pose for a sculptor," he protested. "I don't know how."

"Good God," Tony shouted, "you don't need to pose; just take off your clothes and stand there."

So, for a whole summer, in the big room looking out over the fresh green of Washington Square, they worked together on a lifesize figure. The effect seemed better when Robeson sang, so for hours at a time the studio glowed with the beautiful black body and the deep rhythms of spirituals and work songs. Robeson and Salemme talked, visited galleries together, discussed art. Heywood Broun and Carl Van Vechten and Emma Goldman used to drop by, and everybody would go out to a Greenwich Village restaurant or sit around the studio drinking the grand coffee that Salemme brewed in an old saucepan. Arthur Lee came in from his studio near by, and Glenway Wescott dropped in from next door to talk about the book he was writing, while Robeson rested from his posing, with Tony's bathrobe coming about half way to his knees. In turn Robeson would take everybody uptown and introduce them to his Harlem friends: painters and writers, bootblacks and redcaps and numbers kings. The figure in bronze was but the setting for a summer of every kind of creativeness, and of endless talk.

"The human form is beautiful," Tony Salemme used to say. "Life itself is controlled by the body. And the nude body is beautiful."

Robeson wondered why anyone had ever been ashamed of his body. "I got a sense of bodily freedom," he says. "I began to use my body more and more to create my parts on the stage: power, fear, sorrow. I found there are lots of rhythms besides music and dance."

He talked to his friends about Negroes, their struggles and their good times. Black people, he thought, put more into singing and dancing and got more out of all the arts than others because that was their way of releasing their pounded and pent-up feelings. He felt a kind of mission in showing the strength and sufferings of a Negro in his acting of the characters in O'Neill's plays.

"But must Robeson only appear as an actor when O'Neill writes a Negro play?" Laurence Stallings asked in the *New York World*. "He could do something else for the stage. One wonders if he will play Othello some day with a Desdemona as capable and shy as Miss Cowl might play it, with an Iago as sinister as the memory of John Barrymore's Richard the Third can suggest. . . . After seeing 'All God's Chillun' one can imagine that Shakespeare must have hoped for Robeson."

The critics were wild about this new black actor. The hard-boiled George Jean Nathan wrote in the *American Mercury*:

Robeson, with relatively little experience and with no training to speak of, is one of the most thoroughly eloquent, impressive, and convincing actors that I have looked at and listened to in almost twenty years of professional theatre-going. He gains his effects with means that not only seem natural, but that are natural. He does things beautifully, with his voice, his features, his hands, his whole some-

what ungainly body. . . . The effect is of a soul bombarded by thunder and torn by lightning. . . . It is not acting as John Barrymore knows acting any more than the singing and dancing of the black Florence Mills is singing and dancing as Galli-Curci and Adeline Genée know singing and dancing; it is something that is just over the borderland of acting, and just this side of the borderland of life and reality.

"My friends said a lot of silly things," Robeson claims. "You know this business of Negro prejudice has two sides. When people hate you they go crazy. But when they like you they sometimes go a little crazy too. In football days I got more praise than any white player. And I was credited with a lot of plays I never made. After every scrimmage, the reporters caught sight of 'that big black bruiser' and at once scribbled down that I had made the tackle when most times I wasn't within six feet of the play. In the same way the critics praised my early acting far beyond its worth. Do you remember the trick dog that was lauded for learning to play the xylophone—not that he played so well but that he could play at all! So it is with many white folks when they first 'discover' a Negro."

There was a good deal of loafing around during the run of any play. And Robeson took things easy, getting up late, and doing what he pleased till theater time. One Sunday his friend, Lawrence Brown, who was then accompanist to Roland Hayes, sat strumming the piano in the Robeson apartment, and he and Paul began to sing. His wife sat enthralled—surprised and stunned.

"All these years," she says, "he had been singing around the house, singing all the time, in the bathtub, late at night after I had gone to bed, sometimes bothering me with his comic ballads when I wanted to study, sometimes peeling the

soles off my feet with a low swooping lilt. But it had never struck me before that he was a great singer."

Once it did strike her she lost no time. Stealing to the telephone, she whispered to the Provincetown crowd that she had just discovered the greatest voice in America. In ten minutes she had the two musicians bundled onto the subway and off to MacDougal Street. Guffaws burst from the happy-go-lucky gang when they were told "the greatest voice in America" belonged to their old friend, Paul Robeson. But after he and Brown had done a few songs, they too realized that they had merely been too close to genius to notice it.

At once everything was set in motion with the old-time MacDougal Street zest. A telephone call showed that the Greenwich Village Theatre was free for a Sunday night just two weeks away. It was at once engaged, with a \$100 deposit thrown together none too easily from the change and foldin' money loose in the Village. At once the whole crowd set off on the hurly-burly of getting up the concert. Robeson and Brown were bundled back home to rehearse steadily for the two weeks, under the stern eye of Essie. The directors of the MacDougal Street Theatre began to arrange the settings and lighting. Actors and painters and writers jumped to the job of making posters, getting out circulars, and writing personal letters to their friends. Heywood Broun plugged the papers and wrote wild praise of the "newly discovered voice" in his column in the *New York World*. Then on the fateful night they all put on their dress suits and ball dresses and came to hail their friend in his new role.

On April 19, 1925, Paul Robeson gave his first concert. Having never sung at a public performance before in his life, he came to the theater to find it packed to standing room, and tickets being sold on the street for \$25 apiece. Many of the sponsors had to crowd into the wings and stand in the

lobbies. At the first deep notes of his songs, the audience gave up. They surrendered in an abandon that made them a part of the performance. They refused to go home until, encore after encore, far into the morning, listeners and singer alike were limp with exhaustion and joy.

The music critics and the newspapers applauded with equal abandon.

A. S. in the *World* wrote: "All those who listened last night to the first concert in this country made entirely of Negro music may have been present at a turning point, one of those thin points of time in which a star is born and not yet visible—the first appearance of this folk wealth to be made without deference or apology. Paul Robeson's voice is hard to describe—a voice in which deep bells ring."

Others wrote, "Sung by one man, the spirituals voice the sorrows and hopes of a people. . . . A glorious rich and mellow voice, a dramatic restraint and power that seems to hold untold power behind each song."

An enterprising concert manager promptly signed Robeson and his accompanist, Larry Brown, for a concert tour.

One of the triumphant careers of modern times was launched.

In the autumn of 1925, Robeson took his next step up in fame by a London performance of *The Emperor Jones*. Jimmy Light and Harold McGhee of the Provincetown Players went along with him to direct the play and manage the staging. All three took their wives, so there was plenty of the comradeship and co-operation of the Greenwich Village days. The play was an artistic success, with passionate praise from the highest critics, though it was too stark and novel to have a long run.

Life in London was a joy after the restraints that beset any Negro in America—even so popular and easygoing a hero as Robeson. He was so happy in Europe that, after



the London tour closed, he and his wife took a house for the winter in southern France. Paul lolled in another of his long, lazy vacations, doing nothing but loaf and sing and swim and talk with an interesting new group of friends.

Returned to America, he picked up his concert tours where he had left them. And audiences all over the country melted before his great beautiful voice with the helpless abandon of his first-night friends. He soon found, however, that he would have to get some training if his voice was not to crack or fray out. Up to that time, this man who had already sung America into a frenzy had never had a minute's professional guidance.

When a master of voice was found, Paul Robeson said to him, "I don't want you to try to make me into a professional singer. Just show me how to use my voice without ruining it. I'll do the singing." In all these years he has never wavered from that stand.

"Some of my friends," he says, "scold me for not singing Italian opera and proving that a Negro can handle the most difficult classical music. I laugh at them," he chuckles, with that deep rumble that still crinkles your spine. "I tell them I don't want to prove anything. Roland Hayes has proved a Negro can sing beautifully the finest classics—if it needed proving—and so have Marian Anderson and Dorothy Maynor and dozens of others. I don't want to prove anything. I just want to sing."

Sing he has to his heart's content and to the deep joy of all America and all Europe. And his acting has continued an equal joy to audiences and to him. One of his greatest charms is that it is so clear that he is not a professional. He is the old rollicking great African god, giving pleasure because he is having pleasure, moving audiences because he himself is deeply moved by the strengths and sorrows of the songs he sings and the characters he acts.

From 1926 on, his career has been such a series of triumphs that it is emblazoned on billboards and posters and newspapers throughout the world. Notable stage appearances, in addition to the early plays on MacDougal Street, have included *Show Boat*, probably his greatest commercial success, *Porgy*, *The Hairy Ape*, *Stevedore*, *Black Boy*. Always he delights in strongly Negro characters, the savage force of the black man, the rhythms of his life, the cadences of his troubled sorrows.

Finally, he took up the play that had always fascinated him, and in London in 1930 presented *Othello*. With a feeling that had never before been brought to this terrible and tragic script of Shakespeare's, he played the simple strength of the greathearted Moor, his simple weakness before the poison of jealousy, his towering brutal passion, and his sorrow as he found that he had killed the thing he loved. There are strong taboos against a black man acting opposite a white woman in such a passionate and brutal part. But he has lifted the play above the taboo. In the fall of 1943 he opened a gala season of *Othello* in New York that exceeded even his earlier London triumph.

Robeson's popularity on the radio is great, but it has never equaled his concerts or plays, where his magnetic personality merges with his singing and acting. His greatest radio hit was his singing of "Ballad for Americans," when the response of the millions of listeners all over the country was almost as direct as at his concerts. He is known to millions from his phonograph records. He has made more than a thousand recordings, and from them his great rich voice pours out from dawn to dawn in halls and cabins all over the world.

In motion pictures he is in great demand. But he has been unhappy because of the stereotype which refuses to cast a Negro in any serious role. His experiences in Hollywood are

artistic triumphs and social insults. He declares that he will not again appear in a moving picture until Negroes are given serious, self-respecting roles.

In the midst of their rich and busy lives, Mr. and Mrs. Robeson took out time to have one son, who from the beginning was almost laughably like his father—in looks and actions and even in his voice. Without waiting for an official name, everybody at once called him Paul or Little Paul or Pauli. The boy was born in 1927, and his slight mother had so terrible a time in delivering the baby giant that the doctors said “no” to any more children. The boy is a boon companion, as well as “spitten” likeness, of his father. He was the joy of the parents in their European travels, and he is the center of their present home in America.

This new home the firm-hearted Essie arranged, just as she has so much of the family's career. When they decided to settle finally in America, she looked not for an apartment in Harlem but for a house in the country. In 1941 they bought a handsome, comfortable place near Hartford, Connecticut, with ample grounds and gardens and with white columns at the doorway. Paul sometimes slyly refers to it as “the old plantation.” But he dearly enjoys the leisure and privacy it gives him between tours. And he says, “It's a fine place to raise a boy.”

From 1928 to 1939 the Robesons lived chiefly in Europe. Paul says now that this European life was partly a protest: not so much an escape from the discriminations of life in America—for he has suffered very few of these—as a rebellion against America's attitude on race.

His life in Europe was rich and full, as living always is for him wherever he is. He acted and sang before glad audiences in all the chief cities and towns of England and the Continent. He made in London one of the best known of his moving pictures, *Sanders of the River*. His Negro friends have

criticized this picture as showing a black colonial, happily serving the great white master. But Robeson did some beautiful singing and acting in it and, through its cast of native African boys and girls, he got his first knowledge of African cultures and languages which have been among his deep interests ever since. During his decade abroad, he visited Africa, made two trips to Spain, and in 1935 made the first of his many visits to Soviet Russia.

He has always had a gift for languages, and this lets him come into contact with common people wherever he goes. He learned Russian way back in 1925, long before he ever thought of going there, just because he was fascinated by Chaliapin's singing and Moussorgsky's songs. He learned Chinese even earlier. "I just wanted to read Chinese poetry," he says, "and it wasn't too hard to learn the Chinese characters, though I can't be sure of the tones, that make up so much of the poetic effect, and of the speech, too." He knows several African dialects and is struck by the similar singsong of African and Chinese speech. "My secret ambition," he admits, "has always been to be a professor of languages in some college." He doesn't strike one as just the academic type. But he never misses a chance to sing at any college, white or colored, and to sit around afterwards hours on end, talking and playing and singing with groups of students. And he has used his languages and his fine brain in learning all over the world how common people act and think and feel.

The life in Soviet Russia made a great impression on him. He says:

There I found the real solution of the minority and racial problems, a very simple solution—complete equality for all men of all races. I was struck by the quick success of all groups in taking part in modern civilization, once they were given a chance. Eskimos and people from Turkistan,

who had always been called primitive and backward, took their place as citizen-workers. In a few years they became efficient in every phase of modern life, even in building and handling machinery. I saw with my own eyes that people are not "backward" because of blood or color, but because they are kept back. And I saw what great strength is added to the whole nation when all the people are given a chance to do their part.

Robeson saw the rise of Fascism in Europe. He had planned to continue his life abroad but, as the struggle between Fascism and democracy grew more and more acute, he felt that his place was in his own country. He says:

I saw the connection between the problems of all oppressed peoples and the necessity of the artist to participate fully. I worked as much as I could in relief work for the refugees from Germany, Austria, etc., for the Chinese people, the Ethiopian people, and later went to Spain—that important focal point in the fight against Fascism.

During that struggle I realized the need of returning to America to become a part of the progressive forces of my own land. I felt deep obligations to the Negro people who still suffer acutely, and I recognized that their future was bound with the future of the great masses of the American people, including the forces of labor, the Spanish-American people and the Chinese-American people. I realized that if America held to its democratic traditions and resolutely fought Fascism, elected leaders who recognized the needs of the common struggle and the indivisibility of freedom for all men, the problems of the colored people would be well on their way to solution.

With this new gospel and with the war threatening all democracy, he came back to America in 1939 determined to give his time and his talents to fighting Fascism at home as well as abroad. Since then he has been speaking and singing

at meetings throughout the country, stressing freedom and democracy in all his talks.

His singing now includes not only Negro folk songs but Jewish chants, Russian work songs, Chinese ballads, and martial epics of the common man everywhere on the march to victory. He sings the Russian songs with an effect equaled only by Chaliapin. The Jewish wails carry the same poignant sorrow as the Negro spirituals. The Chinese lilts transfer the grace of an artistic people to the whole world.

"Through my singing and acting and speaking," he says, "I want to make freedom ring. Maybe I can touch people's hearts better than I can their minds, with the common struggle of the common man. Maybe this sounds pompous," he chuckles in apology. But then his face is solemn and his voice rumbles across the floor as he says, "Most of all I want to help my homeland realize that it will grow only as it lets all its people do their full part in making it rich and strong."



